NATION

Delhi sees worst Dec AQI in seven years

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BUSINESS

Govt seeks $30B from BP, RIL for gas underproduction

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SPORTS

India post record score against Lanka in 4th match

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SALAR
DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

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SC stays Sengar's life term suspension in Unnao rape case

SC defends Delhi HC judges, says people are trying to take political advantage

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed the Delhi High Court's order suspending the life sentence of expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape case, directing that he shall not be released from custody.

A vacation bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, along with Justices JK Maheshwari and Augustine George Masih, was hearing a plea by the CBI challenging the high court's 23 December order. The bench said substantial questions of law had arisen which required detailed consideration and issued notice to Sengar, seeking his response within four weeks.

The court noted that ordinarily an order granting bail or suspending a sentence is not stayed without hearing the convict. However, it took into account that Sengar was also convicted and sentenced in a separate case and continued to remain in custody. It added that multiple legal issues, particularly relating to the interpretation of "public servant" under the POCSO Act, warranted examination.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the CBI,

urged the court to stay the high court order, calling the offence a "horrific rape" of a minor. He said the state was answerable to the victim, who was 15 years and 10 months old at the time, and stressed that Sengar was a powerful MLA when the offence was committed.

The Delhi High Court had held that while Sengar was convicted under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act for aggravated sexual assault by a public servant, an elected representative did not fall within the definition of "public servant" under Section 21 of the IPC. The Supreme Court expressed concern that such an interpretation could mean that MPs or MLAs were excluded, while constables or patwaris were covered.

> **I will not rest until he is hanged. I will keep fighting. Only then will my family and I get justice. We receive threats even today**
>
> —Unnao rape survivor

Senior advocate N Hariharan, appearing for Sengar, opposed the CBI's plea and said the matter required careful consideration. The bench acknowledged that arguments from both sides carried weight.

The court also expressed concern over allegations and criticism directed at the high court judges, observing that some people were trying to take political advantage. Both the bench and the Solicitor General strongly condemned any attempt to malign judges, terming them judges of unimpeachable integrity.

Sengar will remain in jail as he is also serving a 10-year sentence in the custodial death case of the victim's father, in which he has not been granted bail. *—PTI*

SC stays its own judgment on Aravalli

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Amid the outcry over the new definition of Aravallis, the Supreme Court on Monday kept in abeyance its 20 November directions that accepted a uniform definition of these hills and ranges, saying that there is a need to resolve "critical ambiguities" including whether the 100-metre elevation and the 500-metre gap between hills criteria will strip significant parts of the range of environmental protection.

Proposing to constitute an expert panel, a bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant said it seemed prima facie that the earlier report of a committee and

the verdict had "omitted to expressly clarify certain critical issues" and there is a " need to probe further" to prevent regulatory gaps that might undermine the ecology of the Aravalli region.

It also directed that as set out in the order dated 9 May 2024, until further orders, no permission shall be granted for mining in the 'Aravalli Hills and Ranges,' as defined in the 25 August 2010 FSI report without its prior permission.

"There has been an outcry among environmentalists, who have expressed concern about the potential for misinterpretation of the newly adopted definition and this court's directions," the bench, also comprising Justices JK Maheshwari and Augustine George Masih, said. "Consequently, there is a need to probe to prevent regulatory gaps that might undermine the ecology of the Aravalli region," the bench said in its order passed in a suo motu matter titled "In Re: Definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges and Ancillary Issues."

The bench further said, "Whether the widely publicised criticism asserting that only 1,048 hills out of 12,081 in Rajasthan meet the 100-metre elevation threshold, thereby stripping the remaining lower ranges of environmental protection, is factually and scientifically accurate. Environmentalist Bhavreen Kandhari said the manner in which mining has been going in the Aravallis is an administrative and governance failure. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 5

Defence ministry clears projects worth ₹79,000 cr

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

The Defence Ministry on Monday approved the procurement of military equipment worth Rs 79,000 crore, including long-range rockets, missiles, and advanced radar systems, to enhance the nation's combat capabilities across the army, navy and air force.

The Defence Acquisition Council approved the procurement of loiter munition systems and long-range guided ammunition for the Army's Pinaka rocket system. It also cleared integrated drone detection and interdiction systems (Mk-II) and low-level lightweight radars to track small, low-flying unmanned aerial systems.

For the Indian Air Force, the DAC approved the procurement of an automatic take-off and landing recording system, Astra Mk-II missiles, a full mission simulator and SPICE-1000 long-range guidance kits, the ministry said. The extended-range Astra Mk-II missiles will enhance fighter aircraft's standoff strike capability, while the upgrades will improve the range and accuracy of the Pinaka rocket system for more effective target engagement.

For the Indian Navy, the DAC approved the procurement of high-frequency software-defined radios (HF SDR) Manpack and the leasing of high-altitude long-endurance remotely piloted aircraft systems (HALE RPAS) for continuous intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance over the Indian Ocean region. *—PTI*

PLAYGROUND OF RUINS

A toddler rides a bike amid the ruins left by the demolition that rendered over 200 families homeless in Waseem Layout and Fakir Colony of Bengaluru's Kogilu village on Monday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD >>>MORE ON PAGE 2***

QUOTE of THE DAY

> **Yet another suicide by a Bengal BLO. Total pan-India: 33. If one alleged 'ghuspetia (infiltrator)', that's not OK, if 33 BLOs die, is that Ok?**
>
> **—KAPIL SIBAL,**
> RS MP, takes a dig at the Centre

Hindu family's house torched in Bangladesh

DHAKA, 29 DEC

As violence against minorities continues in Bangladesh, a house owned by a Hindu family was gutted in a devastating fire in the Paschim Dumritola village in southern Bangladesh. The alarming violence in the past few days was triggered after youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi's death earlier this month and the shifting political environment in the country. Media reports said miscreants set fire to the Saha residence in Dumritola on 27 December. The suspects inserted a cloth inside one of the rooms and set it on fire, and the blaze quickly spread throughout the house.

The house belonged to the Saha family. The blaze destroyed furniture, cash, land documents, educational certificates, and other papers. Taking to X, Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen wrote, "In the Dumritola village of Pirojpur, five rooms of the Saha family's house were burnt down by jihadis." *PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

The two damaged coaches were detached from the train and moved to prevent the fire from spreading ***PHOTO: SCREENGRAB***

1 killed as train catches fire in Andhra

VISAKHAPATNAM, 29 DEC

One person, identified as Chandrasekhar Sundaram, was killed after two coaches of the Tatanagar–Ernakulam Express caught fire at Yalamanchili in Andhra Pradesh. Sundaram's body was found in the B1 coach, ex gratia will be paid to his family. The Vijayawada Division of the South Central Railway (SCR) said B1 and M2 coaches of Train No. 18189 were affected.

Police received information about the fire at 12.45 am on Monday, with 82 passengers in one coach and 76 in another when the blaze broke out, officials said. Passengers from the affected coaches are being shifted to Samalkot station by bus. Initial findings indicate the fire originated in the linen storage area rather than the electrical panel, with two forensic teams probing the cause, the SCR said.

The two damaged coaches were detached from the train and moved to prevent the fire from spreading, after which the train proceeded towards Ernakulam. The remaining coaches are being moved to Samalkot station, where three empty replacement coaches will be attached, and passengers from the damaged coaches will continue to their destinations. *—PTI*

K'taka govt to rehouse 'genuine' Kogilu evictees

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

The Karnataka government on Monday decided to provide alternative accommodation to "genuine" homeless families whose illegally constructed houses or sheds were demolished at Kogilu in north Bengaluru during a recent clearance drive. The relief will be extended on humanitarian grounds.

The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and attended by Deputy Chief Minister and Bengaluru in-charge Minister DK Shivakumar, Housing Minister Zameer Ahmed Khan and senior officials (in pic).

Siddaramaiah directed officials to strictly prevent illegal encroachments and constructions and warned of action against jurisdictional revenue and civic officials if such violations recur. He said illegal encroachments could not occur without official knowledge and accountability would be fixed.

The demolitions at Waseem Layout and Fakir Colony on December 20 were carried out by Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited to clear encroachments for a proposed

solid waste processing unit. The Chief Minister said 167 illegally built houses or sheds on government land were razed after notices were served. Siddaramaiah said district deputy commissioners and corporation officials have been asked to verify the genuineness of the affected families within two days and submit a list of eligible beneficiaries. Based on this, alternative arrangements will be made.

Eligible families will be allotted houses at Byappanahalli, about 7 km from Kogilu, where 1,187 houses have been built for the poor and homeless. Each unit, costing Rs 11.20 lakh, will be allotted from 1 January. *—PTI*

Nandi Hills to stay closed on New Year's eve

CHIKKABALLAPUR, 29 DEC

The Chikkaballapur district administration has once again banned the entry of visitors to the popular Nandi Hills during New Year celebrations to prevent overcrowding and maintain law and order. The restriction will be in force from 2pm on 31 December until 10am on 1 January, Chikkaballapur Superintendent of Police Kushal Chouskey said.

Only guests with prior bookings at government-run guest houses will be permitted to stay on the hill, and no other visitors will be allowed during the restricted period.

Bars and restaurants in the area have been instructed to remain closed. *—Salar News*

POST VIDEO ON INSTAGRAM

TN teens attack migrant with machetes

TIRUVALLUR, 29 DEC

Tamil Nadu Police have arrested four teenagers in Tiruvallur district for allegedly assaulting a migrant worker and uploading a video of the attack as an Instagram reel. The incident occurred on the evening of 26 December near the Tiruttani railway station and aboard a suburban train. According to police, the intoxicated group harassed the victim and assaulted the worker. They later shared the footage online, brandishing a machete to the Tamil song Hukum.

Acting on a public alert, police personnel rushed to the spot and rescued the victim, identified as Suraj, 34, of Kolhapur district in Maharashtra, who had sustained multiple cut injuries. He was given first aid at a local government hospital and later shifted to the Tiruvallur Government Hospital for further treatment.

The group assaulted the worker and they later shared the footage online, brandishing a machete to a Tamil song ***PHOTO: SCREENGRAB***

Preliminary inquiries revealed that the four juveniles, all aged 17 and residents of Nemili near Tiruttani. They allegedly recorded a video of themselves holding a knife to Suraj's neck inside the train. The boys allegedly dragged Suraj to a secluded area near the railway quarters and attacked him after he resisted inside the train. Based on a complaint, the Tiruttani police registered a case and launched an investigation. Surveillance footage from cameras near the railway station shows the teenagers threatening the victim with a knife on a train bound for Tiruttani. *—PTI*

TRIPURA STUDENT HAD BLEEDING IN BRAIN, DAMAGED SPINE: AUTOPSY

GUWAHATI/NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

The medical report of a student from Tripura, who was murdered for protesting against racist comments, showed he suffered bleeding in the brain.

Angel Chakma, 24, died after battling for life for 14 days in a hospital. He was stabbed with a knife and punched with brass knuckles by six men. Apart from the head injury, he had multiple lacerations in the arms and feet. The spine suffered serious damage and he lost movement on the right side of his body.

The suspects have been identified as Suraj Khawas, 22, a resident of Manipur currently living in Dehradun, and five of his friends.

Anjel's father, Tarun Chakma, is with the BSF. He said the attackers called his son "Chinese." Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said five suspects have been arrested. He added that another accused is suspected to have fled to Nepal.The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, today called the killing of Anjel a "horrific hate crime." Meanwhile, in Agartala, the Tripura Chakma Students Association requested Central intervention as there were persistent attacks on people from the Northeast. *—PTI*

Forest staffers capture 2 tigers in HD Kote taluk

MYSURU, 29 DEC

Forest department staff captured two tigers that were terrorising the villagers of Kalmatti, Agasanapura, Metikuppe K M Halli, Sollepura and other villages near the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in HD Kote taluk. Two tigers, one male and another female, were captured in Metikuppe range. The male tiger was captured near Metikuppe while the female tiger was captured near Agasanapura on Monday after setting up a camera trap and a cage. The male tiger is about six years old and the female tiger is around 11 years old. As the female tiger was aged it had lost the capacity to hunt and therefore was attacking livestock in the areas. *—SALAR NEWS*

Srinivasapur tense over rival groups' festivals

SRINIVASAPR, 29 DEC

Tension prevailed at Kotekallur village in Srinivasapur taluk on Tuesday after rival groups clashed over separate celebrations of Vaikuntha Ekadasi and Mukkoti Dwadashi. The dispute arose when two groups began erecting pandals at different locations near the ancient Sri Channakeshava Temple, each claiming the right to organise the festivals through separate trusts and displaying posters and flex boards. Following the escalation, revenue and Muzarai department officials rushed to the spot along with the police. Srinivasapur Tahsildar Sudhindra intervened and directed villagers to observe the festivals jointly, warning that strict action would be taken if attempts were made to hold celebrations at multiple venues. He clarified that the Sri Channakeshava Temple, built on B Kharab land, is government property and no individual or group can claim ownership. He also said steps had already been initiated to bring the temple under the Muzarai department. Authorities cautioned that any further violation of their instructions would invite legal action. *—SALAR NEWS*

Karwar to get super-speciality hospital, jobs: DKS

KARWAR, 29 DEC

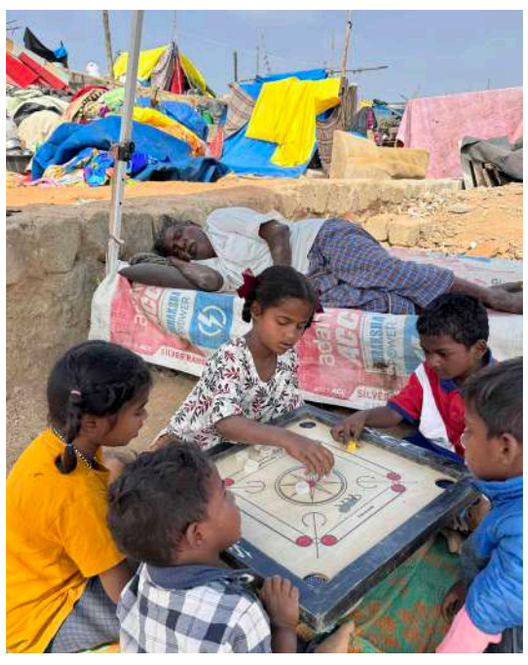
Addressing the long-standing demands of residents in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Sunday announced the establishment of a super-speciality hospital in the Karwar Assembly constituency. He also unveiled a "jobs at the doorstep" scheme aimed at curbing migration of coastal youth in search of employment. Speaking at the 'Karavali Utsava' at Ravindranath Tagore Beach in Karwar, Shivakumar highlighted the need for accessible quality healthcare, noting that residents often had to travel to Goa, Udupi, or Mangaluru for advanced medical treatment. The DyCM also announced plans for a separate tourism policy for the coastal region, intended to generate employment opportunities. A meeting to finalise it will be held on 10 January. *—SALAR NEWS*

VISHWA MANAVA DAY

Karnataka State Bioenergy Development Board chairman SE Sudheendra inaugurated the 122nd birth anniversary celebrations of Kuvempu, observed as Vishwa Manava Day, at the Model Education and Welfare Association High School, Avalahalli, Mysuru Road, on Sunday. Addressing students and villagers, he recalled the life and literary legacy of the Jnanpith awardee. Several Cultural programmes marked the occasion **PHOTO: SALAR**

Panel flags lapses in Kogilu demolitions

Matter has been referred to panel's probe wing to examine claims of rights violations



Rubble lies scattered as families live in tents after the government demolished over 200 houses in Kogilu near Yelahanka in Bengaluru. Amid the debris, children play carrom while an elderly man sleeps on Monday. Several hundred Muslim and Dalit families in Kogilu, a neighbourhood in the Yelahanka area of north Bengaluru, have been left homeless following the mass demolition drive **PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ASAD**

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

A team from the Karnataka State Human Rights Commission (KSHRC) on Monday visited Kogilu in north Bengaluru, where several allegedly illegal houses were demolished earlier this month, and said that, prima facie, alternative arrangements for displaced residents did not appear to have been adequately made.

KSHRC chairperson T Sham Bhatt said the matter has been referred to the commission's investigation wing to examine allegations of human rights violations and to verify whether due legal process was followed during the demolition. Based on the preliminary findings, the commission will issue initial recommendations to the government.

The demolitions at Waseem Layout and Fakir Colony in Kogilu were carried out on 20 December by Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Limited to clear encroachments for a proposed solid waste processing unit. Officials have maintained that the structures were built without official permission and that most occupants were migrants from other states.

A woman cooks as cops inspect the demolition site in Kogilu in north Bengaluru **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Bhatt said commission officers would conduct detailed inquiries, during which affected residents would be required to submit relevant documents. "If the land is government-owned, we will examine the records and make appropriate recommendations to the government," he told reporters.

Residents have alleged that no alternative accommodation was provided before the demolition. Bhatt noted that while some media reports suggested temporary shelter centres were set up at distant locations, all claims would be independently verified. "Considering all factors, we will make preliminary recommendations now, followed by a detailed report after a full inquiry," he said.

Responding to questions, Bhatt said that based on residents' accounts, there appeared to be a prima facie human rights violation, but stressed that no conclusion could be drawn without document verification. Notices have been issued to the district deputy commissioner and the Greater Bengaluru Authority, seeking reports within seven days. The preliminary recommendations are expected to focus on providing temporary shelters and basic amenities, to affected families. *—PTI*

'Will rehabilitate genuine people'

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Monday said the government would not tolerate land encroachments but would rehabilitate evicted residents found to be genuine and without housing.

Visiting the demolition site at Kogilu village, Shivakumar said the land was earmarked for solid waste management nine to ten years ago and encroached upon only recently. Citing satellite images, he claimed structures came up overnight and rejected allegations that residents were registered voters at the same address. Responding to Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan's "bulldozer raj" remark, dyCM accused him of minority votebank politics.

The Deputy CM said residents were given prior notices and noted that houses were built near a leachate pit, posing health risks. He alleged intermediaries collected Rs 1–2 lakh from people and illegally allotted government land. Stressing protection of government land, dyCM said genuine cases would be identified and rehabilitated under housing schemes. *—PTI*

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar visited the demolition site and spoke to the residents **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

RS 2.5 CR DRUGS SEIZED

6 held in joint drug op by Maharashtra ANTF and Bengaluru police

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

Bengaluru police, in coordination with the Maharashtra Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF) and the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), have conducted multiple operations leading to the seizure of narcotics and cash valued at over Rs 2.50 crore and the arrest of six individuals, officials said on Monday.

In a major joint operation between December 24 and 25, the Maharashtra ANTF initially detained Abdul Khader in Mumbai for possessing 1.5 kg of mephedrone. His interrogation led to the arrest of Prashanth Patil of Belagavi and Bengaluru-based Suresh Yadav and Malkhan Ramlal Bishnoi. Police seized 4.2 kg of mephedrone, 17 kg of precursor chemicals, and lab equipment from Yerappanahalli and N Gollahalli villages. Preliminary tests confirmed the substance as amphetamine, though not methamphetamine or MDMA.

Separately, the Central Crime Branch Narcotics Control Wing arrested a foreign national in Soladevanahalli, seizing 1.70 kg of MDMA crystals, 60 ecstasy pills, a laptop, mobile phone, and Rs 2 lakh in cash, with a total estimated value of Rs 2.25 crore. The accused, in India on a business visa, allegedly procured drugs from Delhi and Mumbai for distribution during New Year celebrations.

In another case, an interstate drug peddler was held in Bandepalya. Police recovered 100 LSD strips, five grams of cocaine, and a phone, valued at around Rs 25 lakh. The accused, working as a delivery executive, allegedly bought the drugs at low prices and sold them to known customers. All accused have been produced before the Devanahalli court, while probe continue to trace and verify the purity and value of the drugs. *—PTI*

BJP MLA Salagar booked for alleged Rs 99L loan default

BIDAR, 29 DEC

A case has been registered against BJP MLA Sharanu Salagar for allegedly failing to repay Rs 99 lakh borrowed during the 2023 Assembly elections, following a complaint by a distant relative.

Complainant Sanjukumar Sugure of Basavakalyan alleged he advanced the amount in instalments between January and mid-February 2023 to meet election expenses, trusting Salagar after assurances of repayment within six months. He said he waited nearly two years despite repeated reminders.

According to police, Salagar issued a cheque for Rs 99 lakh during a meeting on September 14, 2025, but it was returned marked "account closed" when presented on September 18. The FIR also alleges Salagar abused and threatened Sugure's family. A legal notice drew no response.

On court orders, police registered a case on December 27 under multiple Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita sections. Salagar has denied the allegations and said he will cooperate. *— Salar News*

CM orders tight security in Bengaluru ahead of New Year

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah ordered the police to take strong action to prevent untoward incidents during New Year celebrations here.

He held a meeting with officials from various departments, including the police, during which he was briefed on precautionary measures put in place.

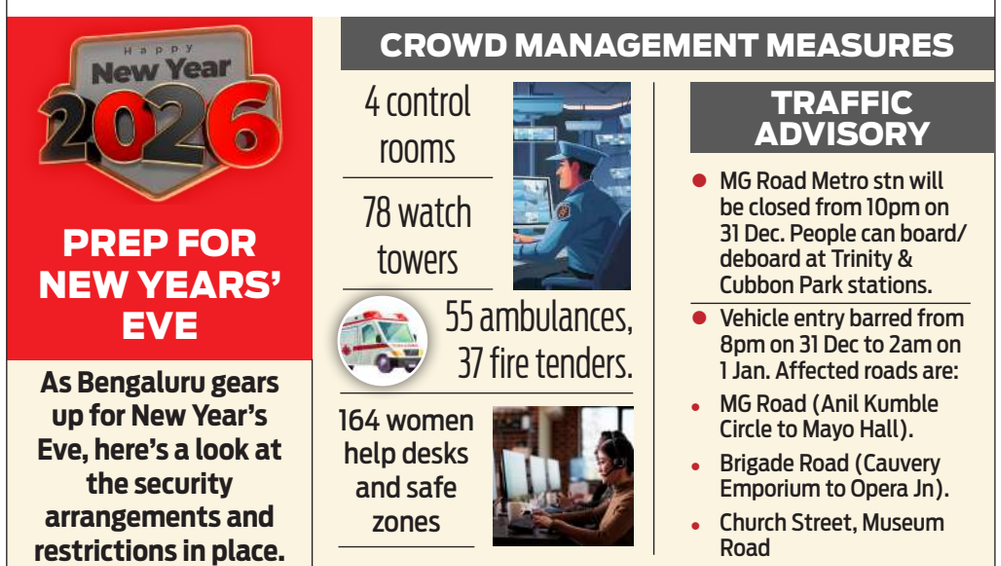
"All precautionary measures should be taken for the safety of women during the New Year celebrations. It should be ensured that no untoward incident occurs," Siddaramaiah was quoted as saying in a statement issued by his office.

He also directed that arrangements be made to ensure that a large number of Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation (BMTC) buses are available after midnight to help people to return home safely.

Steps should be taken to prevent overcrowding in areas like the Mahatma Gandhi Road, Brigade Road, Church Street, Koramangala and Indiranagar, he said.

The chief minister added that two-wheeler traffic will be stopped on 50 flyovers in the city on New Year's Eve.

Meanwhile, in Mysuru, as thousands of tourists arrived to welcome the New Year, the police have tightened security amid heightened concerns due to a recent gas cylinder explosion. Security has been intensified at Myuru Amba Vilas Palace, Chamundi Hills, City Railway Station, Bus Stand and Outer Ring Road. The government has issued an alert to ensure uninterrupted emergency medical services from the night of 31 December until 1 January. Hospitals have been asked to arrange separate rooms for men and women. *— Salar News*


Happy New Year 2026
PREP FOR NEW YEARS' EVE
As Bengaluru gears up for New Year's Eve, here's a look at the security arrangements and restrictions in place.
CROWD MANAGEMENT MEASURES
4 control rooms
78 watch towers
55 ambulances, 37 fire tenders.
164 women help desks and safe zones
20,000 personnel deployed citywide
TRAFFIC ADVISORY
MG Road Metro stn will be closed from 10pm on 31 Dec. People can board/deboard at Trinity & Cubbon Park stations.
Vehicle entry barred from 8pm on 31 Dec to 2am on 1 Jan. Affected roads are:
MG Road (Anil Kumble Circle to Mayo Hall).
Brigade Road (Cauvery Emporium to Opera Jn).
Church Street, Museum Road
High-Footfall zones are under tight watch: MG Road, Brigade Road, Church Street, Indiranagar, Koramangala, Whitefield and Electronics City (Neeladri Road)

AS PER HC DIRECTIVES

Medical boards to determine age of juveniles in crime cases

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

The Karnataka Commissionerate of Health and Family Welfare Services has issued a circular making district-level Medical Boards compulsory for determining the age of juveniles in conflict with law, in compliance with directions of the Karnataka High Court.

Dated 29 December, the circular follows the High Court's Kalaburagi Bench order in Criminal/Writ Petition No. 200464/2015.

The order issued mandated that the State government must constitute Medical Boards for juvenile age assessment.

The directions, issued under Articles 215 and 227 of the Constitution, are binding on all authorities.

Under the guidelines, each Medical Board must comprise four specialists: a physiologist, a dental expert, a radiologist and a forensic expert.

As physiologists are not posted at district hospitals, one from the nearest government medical college must be co-opted for each case to provide expert opinion.

The District Surgeon is designated as the nodal officer responsible for coordinating the Board, including convening meetings promptly, ensuring timely examinations, maintaining proper records, and submitting the final report to the referring authority within the prescribed timeframe.

The circular bars individual medical practitioners from conducting age determination examinations. It added that all cases must be referred exclusively to duly constituted Medical Boards. District Surgeons are instructed to immediately circulate the directions to both government and private medical practitioners and submit compliance reports within the stipulated period. *—Salar News*

BMRCL EXTENDS METRO SERVICES FOR NEW YEAR'S EVE

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) on Monday announced extended metro services on the Purple, Green and Yellow lines for New Year's Eve to ensure safe and convenient travel.

On 1 January, 2026, the last trains will depart as follows: Purple Line – Whitefield to Challaghatta at 1.45 am, Challaghatta to Whitefield at 2 am; Green Line – Madavara to Silk Institute and Silk Institute to Madavara at 2am; Yellow Line – RV Road to Bommasandra at 3.10am, Bommasandra to RV Road at 1.30 am. Last trains from Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Station (Majestic) towards all directions will depart at 2.45 am.

Trains will run at eight-minute intervals on the Purple and Green lines and 15-minute intervals on the Yellow Line from 11.30 pm on 31 December. MG Road Metro Station will be closed from 10pm, with boarding and alighting available at Trinity and Cubbon Park stations. Token sales will end at 11pm; passengers are advised to use smart cards or QR tickets. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Lalit Modi apologises for 'fugitives' joke

LONDON, 29 DEC

IPL founder Lalit Modi on Monday apologised for calling himself and Vijay Mallya the "two biggest fugitives" of India in a video posted on social media and said that his statement was "misconstrued". In the now-deleted video from Mallya's 70th birthday celebrations in London, Lalit Modi joked about the pair's status as the "two biggest fugitives" of India. Issuing an apology, Lalit Modi said in an X post, "I apologise if I have hurt anyone's feelings, especially the Indian Government, whom I have the highest respect and regard for." "The statement was misconstrued and was never intended to be as played out," he added. He concluded the post by offering "deepest" apologies. *—PTI*

T'gana Assembly adjourned till 2 Jan, KCR returns

HYDERABAD, 29 DEC

The winter session of the Telangana Legislative Assembly began on Monday with a solemn tribute to departed legislators. In a significant development, BRS president and Leader of Opposition, K Chandrasekhar Rao, attended the session on Monday. The House paid homage to former MLAs R Damodar Reddy and Konda Laxma Reddy, who passed away recently. After the obituary references and a brief zero hour, Speaker Gaddam Prasad Kumar adjourned the House till 2 January. KCR's appearance on Monday was notable as he had remained absent from the Assembly for the past two years. Despite the acrimonious relationship between Congress and BRS, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy and other Congress leaders went up to KCR's seat and greeted him. *—PTI*

India initiates extradition of fugitive from UAE

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has initiated the extradition process of fugitive Hussain Mohammed Shattaf from the United Arab Emirates, officials said. MEA officials stated that the extradition request has been forwarded to the Indian Embassy in the UAE last week, where Shattaf is believed to be residing illegally using forged documents. Shattaf is wanted for the murder of retired Merchant Navy Captain Manmohan Singh Virdi at Maharashtra's Lonavala in 2006. Shattaf faces murder charges along with separate cases of forgery, criminal breach of trust, and obtaining a passport under false details. He allegedly fled India after the crime and forged a marriage certificate to secure residency in the UAE. His Indian passport, issued in 2019, expired in 2021. *—PTI*

MEA trashes Pak for remarks on minorities in India

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

India on Monday said Pakistan's "horrific and systemic victimisation" of minorities of various faiths is a well established fact and no amount of "finger pointing" will "obfuscate" it. New Delhi said this while strongly trashing Pakistan's comments on the condition of minorities in India. In Islamabad, Pakistan for-eign office spokesperson Tahir Andrabi, responding to media queries on alleged vandalism during Christmas celebrations in some places in India, said "persecution of minorities in India is a matter of deep concern". Andrabi referred to what he called "recent condemnable incidents" of vandalism during Christ-mas, as well as campaigns allegedly targeting Muslims. *—ANI*

Time to end hate crimes against NE people: Leaders

Tipra Motha announces a Rs 10L reward for info on accused

AGARTALA/NEW DELHI/ DEHRADUN, 29 DEC

Leaders cutting across political lines called for comprehensive efforts to end "hate crimes" against the people from the northeastern states.

This comes after 24-year-old **Anjel Chakma**, an MBA student, from Nandannagar in West Tripura district was attacked by a group of six people when he objected to a racial slur at Dehradun on 9 December. He succumbed to his injuries on 26 December.

Five out of six accused have already been arrested, while the mastermind is absconding, the police said.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and other opposition leaders targeted the BJP, alleging that the murder of MBA student was a fallout of the ruling dispensation "normalising" hate and encouraging a "divisive mindset". Samajwadi Party Chief Akhilesh Yadav demanded that the Supreme Court step in and ensure justice.

People holds a candlelight march at Gandhi Park protesting the assault and death of Angel Chakma, in Dehradun, on Monday *PHOTO: PTI*

Former Union minister Shashi Tharoor said the brutal killing "is a national disgrace", and political and religious leaders must speak out against the abuse of the people from the Northeast as "silence is complicity".

Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal said Union Minister Amit Shah must speak up against the hate crimes.

Assam Chief Minister and BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sarma called the death "heartbreaking and unacceptable".

- Five out of six accused have already been arrested, while the mastermind behind the murder is still on the run, the police said.

Meanwhile, Tipra Motha Supremo Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma announced a Rs 10 lakh cash reward on information that will lead to the arrest of the main accused.

The Tipra Motha Party-run Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council announced a compensation of Rs 3 lakh to the family members of the deceased, to support his final rites.

DHAMI SPEAKS TO STUDENT'S FATHER

Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Monday in a phone conversation with Anjel Chakma's father, Tarun Prasad Chakma, assured justice. *—PTI*

AMIT SHAH IN ASSAM

'B'deshi infiltrators are Cong's vote bank'

BORDUWA/GUWAHATI/ KOLKATA, 29 DEC

Union Home Minister **Amit Shah** on Monday accused the Congress of considering Bangladeshi infiltrators, who threatened Assam's people, their culture, land and identity, as its vote bank.

Addressing a public rally here, Shah said the Centre would identify all illegal immigrants from the neighbouring country, not only from Assam but also from the rest of India.

He also said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not only "ensured the protection of the cultural identity of the Assamese people but also focused on all-around development of the state".

"Give the BJP another five years to ensure infiltrator-free Assam," he told the people at the rally. ''We will identify all Bangladeshi infiltrators not only from Assam but also from the rest of India'', he said.

Shah arrived in Assam on Monday for a day-long visit to inaugurate several projects and address a public meeting.

Additionally, he inaugurated Rs 227 crore redeveloped Batadrava Than, the birthplace of Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva, in Assam's Nagaon district.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Union ministers Sarbananda Sonowal and Pabitra Margherita and state cultural minister Bimal Bora were present during the inauguration of the project.

Shah arrived here on Monday evening on a three-day visit to West Bengal, where assembly elections are due early next year.

Meanwhile, Shah arrived in Kolkata airport at around 7.25pm and headed straight to the BJP office, where he will take stock of the party's organisational preparedness for the assembly elections, a senior BJP leader said.

He is also expected to hold a press conference in the city on Tuesday.

Shah may chair several meetings with workers during his stay. *—PTI*

Greens welcome SC stay on Aravalli definition

NEW DELHI/JAIPUR, 29 DEC

Environmentalists on Monday welcomed the Supreme Court's decision to keep in abeyance its 20 November order that accepted a uniform definition of the Aravalli hills, calling it a crucial pause to prevent irreversible ecological damage.

They urged that the proposed high-powered panel reviewing the issue must include independent environmental experts and ecologists, not just bureaucrats.

The apex court stayed its earlier directive endorsing the definition recommended by a committee of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and proposed constituting a panel of domain experts to undertake a comprehensive, multi-temporal examination of

the Aravalli Hills and Ranges. Notices were also issued to the Centre and Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana and Delhi in the suo motu case.

Environmentalists warned that the earlier definition risked opening large stretches of the fragile mountain system to mining and real estate activity.

Neelam Ahluwalia of People for Aravallis termed the court's intervention an "interim win" and reiterated demands for a cumulative environmental and social impact assessment covering the entire range.

Vimlendu Jha described he Court's move to put its own order on hold as "unprecedented".

The Congress later welcomed the court's decision. Leader Jairam Ramesh warned that the redefinition could further damage an already degraded ecosystem and contradict Forest Survey of India recommendations, calling the ruling a "ray of hope" for protecting the Aravallis. *—Agencies*

Rivals reunite: Uncle & nephew join hands for Pune civic polls

PUNE, 29 DEC

The NCP and NCP (SP), headed by Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and his uncle Sharad Pawar, sealed an alliance for the upcoming elections to the Pune Municipal Corporation on Monday, a day before the deadline for filing nominations ends.

The fresh tie-up was announced a day after the NCP, a constituent of the ruling Mahayuti alliance, and NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar), a member of the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi, finalised an alliance for the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation elections in Pune district.

"After NCP (SP) Pune unit chief Prashant Jagtap's exit from the party, several workers approached the party working president Supriya Sule and requested the need for joining hands with NCP.

"A decision on the alliance has been taken considering the sentiments of local party workers," said NCP (SP) MLA Rohit Pawar on Monday.

The alliances have been forged to ensure that the election battle becomes easier for both factions, he said, adding that for now, the parties will fight the Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad civic polls together.

Elections to 29 civic bodies in Maharashtra will be held on 15 January. The counting of votes will take place the next day. The last date for filing nominations is 30 December.

Rohit Pawar clarified that NCP (SP) Chief was not involved in the decision related to finalising the alliance. A seat-sharing formula has also been decided, he said, without elaborating further. *—PTI*

AMID POWER STRUGGLE

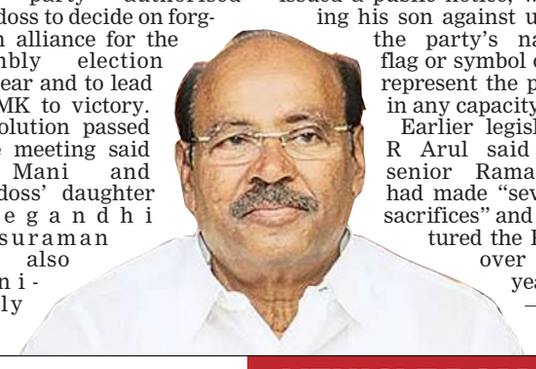
PMK founder Ramadoss elected as party president

SALEM, 29 DEC

PMK founder Dr **S Ramadoss** was unanimously elected president of the party at its general council and executive committee meeting here on Monday.

The meeting was held amid a power struggle between Ramadoss and his son, former union health minister Anbumani.

The party authorised Ramadoss to decide on forging an alliance for the Assembly election next year and to lead the PMK to victory. A resolution passed at the meeting said GK Mani and Ramadoss' daughter Sreegandhi Parasuraman were also unanimously



elected as PMK honorary president and working president, respectively.

Sreegandhi replaces her brother Anbumani, who was expelled in October.

Sreegandhi will also replace Sowmiya, wife of Anbumani, as the president of Pasumai Thayagam, an NGO promoting conservation of nature floated by Ramadoss.

Recently, the PMK founder issued a public notice, warning his son against using the party's name, flag or symbol or to represent the party in any capacity.

Earlier legislator R Arul said the senior Ramadoss had made "several sacrifices" and nurtured the PMK over the years. *—PTI*

BON VOYAGE

Indian Navy's indigenous sailing vessel Kaundinya starts its maiden overseas voyage from Porbandar in Gujarat to Oman on 29 December. The 19.6m long vessel is built using coir ropes, natural resin and coconut fibres by Kerala artisans. This is a recreation of a 5th century vessel inspired by an Ajanta Cave painting. It carries 15-17 members including economist and historian Sanjeev Sanyal, sharing the open-deck view. It relies on sails, oars and dry rations *PHOTO: X/@NARENDRAMODI*

India's hydel project is weaponisation of water: Pak Senator

ISLAMABAD, 29 DEC

A Pakistani Senator on Monday said that "weaponisation of water" will further "inflame" the already tenuous ties between Pakistan and India. The remarks by Pakistan Peoples Party Senator Sherry Rehman came after a panel under the Ministry of Environment in New Delhi approved a hydel power project on Chenab River. The clearance came in the backdrop of India suspending the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan following the deadly Pahalgam terror attack in April this year.

In a post on X, Reman talked about the panel's clearance to 260-megawatt Dulhasti Stage-II hydropower project on Chenab river in Jammu and Kashmir's Kishtwar district. India took a series of punitive measures against Pakistan a day after Pahalgam attack on 22 April, including putting IWT in abeyance. *—PTI*

VEHICLE DAMAGED, EXITS BLOCKED

WB SIR observer faces public ire during hearing

KOLKATA, 29 DEC

The vehicle of Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) observer, C Murugan, was damaged after an agitating crowd gheraoed the official on Monday during his visit to an SIR hearing centre at Magrahat in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district, an EC official said.

According to Election Commission sources, the agitators, mostly women, blocked the exit route of Murugan's vehicle and banged on the bonnet and windowpanes as police personnel struggled to clear a passage by forming a cordon. A video of the incident was shared with the EC, though PTI could not independently verify its authenticity. The driver-side door handle was found ripped off.

A man gets his documents verified at a school during a hearing under the SIR of electoral rolls, in Kolkata, West Bengal, on Monday *PHOTO: PTI*

Murugan was first gheraoed on reaching Shirakol High School, the hearing venue, where protesters alleged "unplanned implementation" of the SIR exercise, claiming that ill, elderly and pregnant electors were being forced to appear for hearings.

Eyewitnesses said a group of local protesters, led by TMC-run Zilla Parishad president Mujibar Rahaman Mollah, demanded entry for the party's Booth Level Agents-2 at the hearings. "It wasn't a political agitation. I was only supporting ordinary people and asking that BLAs be allowed to ensure valid voters are not disqualified," Rahaman said.

Murugan said he would complete his assignment despite disruptions. A Commission source said requests for special police protection went unheeded. The officer has faced similar gheraoes earlier. The state CEO's office said a detailed report would be sought. *—PTI*

Parliament panel reviews G RAM G Act adoption

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

A parliamentary panel on Monday examined various aspects of the UPA-era rural job guarantee law MGNREGA, which has now been replaced by VB-G RAM G Act, and how to go about with it in the next six months for a smooth transition to the new legislation.

Sources said most members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj were concerned about how the transition would take place in the next six months when the government shifts work policies from MGNREGA to the VB-G RAM G Act, how the payments would be made to beneficiaries during this period and how additional budgetary support would be arranged.

No member opposed the VB-G RAM G Act during the meeting, and several of them expressed concern that the enrollment under the old law was only around 50 per cent in many states, sources said.

Members also said it would take at least six months to implement the VB-G RAM G Act, as it will be implemented only after the rules are framed.

The MGNREGA was passed by the Congress-led UPA in 2005. The VB-G RAM G Bill was passed in Parliament recently. *—PTI*

Never forget mother tongue: Prez Murmu

JAMSHEDPUR, 29 DEC

President Droupadi Murmu encouraged individuals to cherish their mother tongues while addressing the 22nd Santali 'Parsi Maha' and the centenary of the Ol Chiki script at the Dishom Jaherthan courtyard in Jamshedpur. She began her speech with a prayer to 'Jaher Aayo' in Santali, asserting, "There is no harm in learning every language, but never forget your own mother tongue." She highlighted the significance of the Ol Chiki script, now available digitally, and praised Tata Steel for promoting it. The President acknowledged the Centre's allocation of Rs 24,000 crore for the development of particularly vulnerable tribal groups and honoured twelve distinguished Santali individuals for their contributions to literature. *—PTI*

MP CM orders probe into scribe's assault by cops

SEHORE, 29 DEC

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has ordered an investigation into the alleged assault of Zee News correspondent Pramod Sharma by police in Sehore district. The Chief Minister's Office confirmed that Yadav directed the Director General of Police to conduct a thorough investigation through a senior officer. He expressed his hopes for the journalist's speedy recovery and instructed the Bhopal collector to ensure he receives the best medical attention. The incident occurred during a protest by Karni Sena activists, during which police reportedly snatched a camera and assaulted Sharma while he was covering the event. *—PTI*

UP Police hashtag trends globally on X for over 2 hours

LUCKNOW, 29 DEC

A hashtag related to a two-day conference of senior Uttar Pradesh police officers trended globally on social media, generating 1.7 billion impressions. The Hindi hashtag #UP_Police_Manthan, linked to the "Police Manthan" conference chaired by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, took the top spot on the global trending list, reaching number one around 5.30pm on 28 December. Oversight by Director General of Police Rajeev Krishna led to the widespread sharing of conference-related content, amassing over 47,000 posts. The hashtag remained in the top five global trends for approximately three hours, promoting a technology-based policing framework and swift crime response. *—PTI*

Delhi sees worst Dec AQI in seven years

Average AQI at 349; Delhi govt forms 11-member expert panel to tackle air pollution problem

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Delhi recorded its worst air quality for December this year since 2018 with an average AQI of 349, even as farm fires accounted for just 3.5 per cent of the PM2.5 pollution, according to official data.

On Monday, Delhi's air quality slipped into the 'severe' category with an AQI of 401 at 4pm as against 390, in the 'very poor' category, on Sunday.

Air quality was 'severe' at 22 stations and 'very poor' at 14, with Vivek Vihar recording the highest AQI at 456. Dense morning fog affected vehicular movement, while temperatures ranged between 7 and 24 degrees Celsius amid light northwesterly winds.

As pollution levels spiked, the Delhi government constituted an 11-member expert committee to suggest long-term solutions and a 16-member implementation panel to ensure faster execution of anti-pollution measures. Vehicular emissions remain a key focus, with over 50,200 potholes repaired this year and 469 km of roads recarpeted.

Vehicles cut through a thick smog as Delhi's AQI remained above 400 on Monday, placing it firmly in the 'severe' category and worsening conditions across the capital *PHOTO: ANI*

Meanwhile, severe cold and dense fog also disrupted Punjab, Haryana and Jharkhand, reducing visibility below 50 metres in several areas. Hisar and Kanke were the coldest at 2.1 and 2.5 degrees Celsius, respectively. IMD issued yellow alerts in Jharkhand due to fog. *—PTI*

Delhi airport sees 128 flight cancellations

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI, 29 DEC

At least 128 flights were cancelled, eight diverted, and nearly 200 delayed at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) on Monday due to dense fog and low visibility, airport authorities said. Of the cancellations, 64 were departures and 64 arrivals, while diverted flights were rerouted to other airports. Flight-tracking website Flightradar24 reported an average delay of 24 minutes.

Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL) posted on X that runway visibility is gradually improving, but some flight operations may still be affected. "Fog continues across Delhi and northern airports, slowing flight movements," an IndiGo statement read, adding that departures and arrivals are being sequenced for steady operations.

IndiGo cancelled 80 flights across its network on Monday, half from Delhi, with others affected at Mumbai, Bengaluru, Cochin, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Amritsar, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Dehradun, Indore, Patna, and Bhopal. The airline said fog may continue to affect flight timings into the afternoon.

DGCA's official fog window from 10 December to 10 February mandates CAT-III operations, requiring pilots trained for low-visibility conditions and CAT-IIIB-compliant aircraft capable of landing with runway visual ranges under 50 metres. *—PTI*

1 HELD FROM GUJARAT

Cops, fake 'Justice Chandrachud' dupe woman of Rs 3.71 cr

MUMBAI, 29 DEC

A man was arrested from Gujarat for allegedly receiving a major share of Rs 3.71 crore siphoned off from a 68-year-old Mumbai woman in a "digital arrest" cyber fraud, police said on Monday.

According to officials, the fraudsters posed as personnel from Colaba police station and central agencies, and even staged a fake online court hearing in which one accused introduced himself as "Justice Chandrachud".

The victim, a resident of Andheri West, was told she was under digital arrest in a money laundering case and was kept under constant surveillance between 18 August and 13 October, police said.

She first received a call claiming her bank account had been used for laundering money and was warned not to share the information with anyone. The caller, posing as an officer, later told her the case was being transferred to the CBI and sought her bank details.

The accused also made her write a personal essay to "verify" her innocence and assured her bail. She was later asked to appear on a video call before a person posing as a judge and submit investment details, leading her to transfer Rs 3.75 crore into multiple accounts. When communication stopped, she reported the matter to the West Region Cyber Police. Investigators traced one mule account to Surat, nabbing a man who opened a fake cloth trading firm to launder Rs 1.71 crore for commission. *—PTI*

POLICE PELTED WITH STONES

Violence in Rishikesh over probing of 2,866 acres of forest land lease

RISHIKESH, 29 DEC

Stones were pelted at police and forest department teams during a protest by local residents in Rishikesh on Sunday against the work of an investigation committee probing the lease of 2,866 acres of reserved forest land, constituted on the Supreme Court's directions. Protesters also blocked the highway and railway tracks, disrupting traffic for several hours.

The agitation escalated in the Mansa Devi area around 4pm, when demonstrators staged a sit-in on railway tracks, halting the Rishikesh-bound Barmer Express for nearly four hours. Roads were also blocked at multiple points. Police said stones were thrown at officials attempting to carry out the survey work.

Dehradun Senior SP Ajay Singh reached the spot after receiving information and persuaded protesters to lift the blockade, restoring rail and road traffic.A police 'flag march' was later conducted in Shyampur to maintain law and order and deter further unrest.

People protest as a survey team arrives following a Supreme Court order probing the leasing of government forest land, in Rishikesh *PHOTO: PTI*

The Uttarakhand government formed the inquiry committee following a SC order dated 22 December, directing a probe into the lease of reserved forest land. The panel is surveying areas including Bapu Gram, Shivaji Nagar, Meera Nagar, Nandu Farm, Malviya Nagar, and Mansa Devi, and must submit a status report to the apex court by 5 January.

Experts said the land falls under the reserved forest category and cannot be registered, but is allegedly being bought and sold on stamp papers worth Rs 100.The issue reached the Supreme Court through a petition filed by Anita Kandwal. Police said individuals inciting protests for vested interests have been identified. *—PTI*

N Vijayakumar *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

Sabarimala row: Ex-TDB member Vijayakumar held

T'PURAM, 29 DEC

Former Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) member N Vijayakumar was arrested on Monday in connection with the Sabarimala gold loss case, police said.

According to the police sources, Vijayakumar was a member of the TDB during the tenure of former president A Padmakumar, who has already been arrested in the case regarding the loss of gold from the doorframes of the Sreekovil (sanctum sanctorum).

During the tenure of the board, approval was given to hand over gold plates to the prime accused, Unnikrishnan Potti, for electroplating in 2019.

Vijayakumar was summoned to the Special Investigation Team (SIT) office in Thiruvananthapuram, where he was questioned. After the interrogation, his arrest was recorded, sources said. He will be produced before the Kollam Vigilance court later.

With his arrest, Vijayakumar became the 10th accused to be arrested as part of the probe into the loss of gold from the Dwarapalaka idols and the Sreekovil doorframes of the Sabarimala temple. *—PTI*

Tezpur University sees 24-hr hunger strike to mark 100 days of protest

TEZPUR, 29 DEC

All stakeholders of Tezpur University, which has been witnessing sustained protests since mid-September against irregularities allegedly committed by Vice Chancellor Shambhu Nath Singh, began a 24-hour hunger strike on Monday after their stir completed 100 days without any success.

The institute, located on the north bank of the Brahmaputra in the Sonitpur district of Assam, has been paralysed with intense protests since 29 November as a joint forum of all stakeholders demanded the removal of the beleaguered VC for his alleged involvement in corruption, and an inquiry into his actions.

Tezpur University United Forum (TUUF), a joint platform of students, teachers and non-teaching staffers, expressed disappointment that even after 100 days no assurance had been provided to remove the VC. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Actor Jayasurya and his wife quizzed in laundering case

KOCHI, 29 DEC

Malayali actor Jayasurya and his wife were questioned by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in a money laundering case linked to an alleged cheating scheme. The investigation arises from multiple FIRs filed by Thrissur police regarding an online bidding application named 'Save Box'. Sources indicate that the scheme was operated by Swathi Rahim, who reportedly informed the ED that funds from investors were "partly diverted" to the film industry, including payments to Jayasurya for brand endorsement. Rahim allegedly paid around Rs 30 lakh through banking channels and additional cash at a boutique owned by Jayasurya's wife. The couple stated they signed a formal endorsement deal for Rs 75 lakh, but claimed the advertisement was "never released" due to incomplete payments. *—PTI*

5-yr-old boy guards dead dad, sick mom in Odisha forest

BHUBANESWAR, 29 DEC

A five-year-old boy spent the entire night alone in a forested area amid bone-chilling cold, guarding his dead father and unconscious mother before seeking help.

The incident took place in Odisha's Deogarh district when the little boy was found on the road near the forest seeking help from the public on Sunday morning.

His parents, Dushmant Majhi and Rinki Majhi, residents of Jianantapali village, had consumed pesticide after a domestic dispute while returning home on a motorcycle, police said.

They parked the motorcycle by the roadside and walked about a kilometre into the forest, where they consumed poison. "While Dushmant died within an hour, his wife Rinki fell unconscious. The son watched them lying on the ground. The boy guarded his parents all night and sought help after sunrise," Deogarh ASP Dhiraj Chopdar said.

The ASP said the woman also died later at Chhendipada hospital, but the child survived, although he was also given the pesticide by his parents. *—PTI*

DOG-BITTEN ANIMAL DIES

200 get rabies jabs after eating sick buffalo's curd

BUDAUN, 29 DEC

Nearly 200 residents of Piprauli village in Uttar Pradesh's Budaun district were administered anti-rabies vaccines as a precaution after discovering they had consumed curd made from the milk of a buffalo that later died after a suspected rabid dog bite, officials said on Sunday.

Villagers said the raita was served during a funeral ceremony held on 23 December. A few days later, it emerged that the buffalo supplying the milk had been bitten by a dog earlier and subsequently fell ill. The animal died on 26 December, triggering panic over possible rabies exposure among those who had eaten the dish.

Following the discovery, villagers rushed to the Ujhani Community Health Centre, where vaccination drives were initiated. Chief Medical Officer Dr Rameshwar Mishra said authorities were informed that the buffalo had shown symptoms consistent with rabies. "As a preventive step, everyone who had consumed the raita or had doubts was advised to take the anti-rabies vaccine," he said.

PHOTO: AI

Dr Mishra added that while boiling milk typically eliminates the risk of rabies transmission, health officials opted for vaccination to rule out potential danger. "Prevention is better than cure. There is normally no risk after boiling, but vaccination was done to ensure safety," he said.

The health department maintained that no illness has been reported so far and the situation remains normal. Medical facilities were kept open over the weekend to administer vaccines, and the village continues to be monitored to prevent panic or misinformation.

Villager Dharmpal said fears arose because raita was made using milk from the same buffalo that later died. *—PTI*

Ajmer Urs reaffirms message of global harmony

At the sacred conclusion of the 814th Annual Urs Mubarak of Hazrat Khawaja Moinuddin Chishty (r), we offer our deepest gratitude to the Almighty for blessing Ajmer Sharif with the presence of over one million seekers who gathered in humility, prayer, and love which transcend boundaries of faith, language, nationali-ty, and culture.

This Urs was not merely a historic commemoration but a living prayer for humanity amid global moral strain. For over eight centuries, Ajmer Sharif has remained a spiritual refuge where wounded hearts find solace and divided souls find unity.

The message of Khawaja Gharib Nawaz, love for all, malice for none, continues to serve as a universal ethic for a world yearning for healing, reaffirming that true spirituality unites rather than divides.

The year 2025 has exposed humanity's fragility through terror, violence, polarisation and threats to social harmony, from attacks in Australia and Pahalgam to concerns for minorities in Bangladesh. Every innocent life lost is a sacred trust violated.

From Ajmer Sharif, prayers are offered for the safety, dignity and freedom of vulnerable communities worldwide. As humanity approaches 2026, this Urs calls for hope rooted in justice, dialogue over division, education against extremism and service above selfishness, renewing the collective pursuit of peace and compassion. Urs Mubarak to all. Peace be upon humanity.

— Haji Syed Salman Chishty
Gaddi Nashin, Dargah Ajmer Sharif
Chairman, Chishty Foundation

US BRACES FOR 'BOMB CYCLONE'

More than 40 million people are on alert in the United States as the next winter storm is forecast. A rapidly intensifying 'bomb cyclone' is bringing heavy snow and blizzards to the US. The National Weather Service said hazardous conditions could stretch from Montana to Maine, and from Texas to Pennsylvania. The snow storm brings with it near-zero visibility, power outages and up to a foot of snow, accompanied by winds of 40–65 mph

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

Controversy on redefining Aravallis: An explainer

The Aravalli hills, one of the world's oldest mountain ranges, have become the eye of a growing political storm over its new defining criteria and the environmental implications of the new definition.

Here is an explainer of what is happening and why.

What is the controversy about?

A committee of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) recommended a change in the definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges to protect the world's oldest mountain system in October this year.

The Supreme Court accepted the recommendations last month but kept the order in abeyance on Monday.

What were the committee's recommendations?

The committee had recommended that the "Aravalli Hill" be defined as any landform in designated Aravalli districts with an elevation of 100 metres or more above its local relief, and an "Aravalli Range" will be a collection of two or more such hills within 500 metres of each other.

The committee, while defining the Aravalli hills, said, "Any landform located in the Aravalli districts, having an elevation of 100 metres or more from the local relief, shall be termed as Aravalli Hills... The entire landform lying within the area enclosed by such lowest contour, whether actual or extended notionally, together with the Hill, its supporting slopes and associated landforms irrespective of their gradient, shall be deemed to constitute part of the Aravalli Hills."

Opposition to the new definition of Aravallis

Activists, scientists and opposition alleged that the redefinition could open vast stretches of the fragile mountain ecosystem to mining. Those who opposed the Centre's new definition alleged that it was done without adequate scientific assessment or public consultation. So, it risks exposing large parts of the Aravallis across Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat to mining.

A committee of the Environment Ministry recommended a change in the definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges to "protect" the world's oldest mountain system, but opened it up to industrialisation instead ***PHOTO: ANI***

- Those who opposed the Centre's new definition alleged that it was done without adequate scientific assessment or public consultation. So, it risks exposing large parts of the Aravallis across Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat to mining

Importance of Aravallis

The Aravalli hills and ranges are among India's oldest geological formations, stretching from Delhi through Haryana, Rajasthan and into Gujarat. Historically, they have been recognised across 37 districts by state governments, with their ecological role noted as a natural barrier against northern desertification and a protector of biodiversity and water recharge.

The Supreme Court had in November emphasised that uncontrolled mining here poses a "great threat to the ecology of the nation" and directed uniform criteria to safeguard them. Their conservation is thus vital for ecological stability, cultural heritage, and sustainable development.

Ban on new mining leases

The Supreme Court had, on 20 November, accepted a uniform definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges and banned the grant of fresh mining leases inside its areas spanning Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat until experts' reports are out.

Following widespread concern over the implications of the new definition, the MoEFCC also announced a ban on new mining leases.

What would have remained protected as per the new definition?

Parts of Aravallis are designated as tiger reserves, national parks, sanctuaries, eco-sensitive zones around these protected areas, and wetlands and plantations under the compensatory afforestation scheme.

These areas remain out of bounds for mining or development, unless permitted specifically under the relevant wildlife and forest acts, irrespective of their status as Aravalli hills.

—PTI

SALAR سالار

India-Bangladesh ties saw a downturn in 2025

Bangladesh's ties with India witnessed a downturn as it navigated a turbulent 2025 marked by political instability, economic strain and alleged persecution of minorities, leading to a diplomatic tussle between the two neighbours.

The relationship between India and Bangladesh hit a rough note after the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India in August last year following anti-government protests.

She was sentenced to death in absentia by a tribunal for her alleged role in a deadly crackdown during the agitation.

Dhaka summoned Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma five times over various issues, while India summoned Bangladesh's High Commissioner Reaz Hamidullah once to express concerns over security in Bangladesh.

The transition, from what was regarded as an "India-friendly" Awami League government to Muhammad Yunus-led interim dispensation, significantly altered Bangladesh's diplomatic posture. Dhaka's engagement with Islamabad to deepen ties further complicated the regional equation.

According to experts, Bangladesh's crisis was worsened by a lack of interest from major global powers in engaging with the Yunus-led interim government, leaving Dhaka diplomatically adrift.

Analysts labelled 2025 as a "missing year" for Bangladesh due to the absence of an elected government. During this time, major embassies engaged more with political parties poised to form the next government rather than with the interim administration.

Former ambassador Mahfuzur Rahman told PTI that Bangladesh went through 2025 "with no clear foreign policy directive" and "no important country engaged Dhaka with any deep thought".

The South Asian nation, with a population of around 175 million, has allegedly seen a growing shift toward religious conservatism amid a prolonged period of political instability.

The closing months of 2025 witnessed the rise of anti-India forces, raising concerns across the region. Dhaka University international relations professor Imtiaz Ahmed told PTI that "state-complicity" played a crucial role in the rise of anti-India forces.

Security analyst and 1971 Liberation War veteran Nasir Uddin said the evolving situation exposed Bangladesh to a "dangerous" geopolitical phase, particularly in its ties with major regional and international powers.

The violent, student-led agitation known as the July Uprising, which ousted Hasina's government in 2024, fundamentally altered Bangladesh's political landscape. However, analysts say, even over a year after the upheaval, Bangladesh showed little improvement in stability, with political violence and economic crisis continuing.

Political violence has increased after the Election Commission declared 12 February, 2026, as the date for general elections.

The killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, a leader of Inqilab Mancha known for his anti-India rhetoric, on 18 December triggered nationwide protests and violence.

A few days later, another student leader, Motaleb Shikder, was shot in the head.

The year also reportedly saw a rise in attacks on Hindus and Liberation War veterans. Media organisations and shrines of Sufi saints were also attacked.

Former prime minister and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairman Khaleda Zia's critical health also remained in the news in 2025.

With the 80-year-old BNP chief on a ventilator, attention increasingly shifted to her son, Tarique Rahman, who returned from London ahead of the polls after over 17 years in self-exile. Rahman's arrival energised BNP supporters.

With the Awami League absent from the political scene, BNP has emerged as the principal political force, while Jamaat-e-Islami positioned itself as a key rival by forging alliances with other fringe groups. The Yunus-led government has banned the Awami League from contesting the elections.

Adding a new dimension to the electoral arena was the emergence of several student-led political parties, including NCP and Inqilab Mancha, born out of protest movements.

Yunus was appointed head of the interim administration, backed by the Students Against Discrimination (SAD) platform. In February, a major offshoot of SAD launched the National Citizen Party.

On the economic front, Bangladesh grappled with slower growth, high inflation, subdued investment and rising unemployment through 2025. Observers linked these challenges to political instability since 2024.

In December, National Board of Revenue Chairman Md Abdur Rahman Khan warned that Bangladesh has slipped into a "debt trap", with debt servicing becoming the second-largest budget expense and the tax-to-GDP ratio falling to around seven per cent from 10 per cent.

As 2025 draws to a close, Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, grappling with political uncertainty, economic crisis and strained ties with its closest neighbour.

—PTI

West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee members burn an effigy of Bangladesh Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus condemning the violence against minorities in Bangladesh, in Kolkata. ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Baskets to blink: The year 10-minute delivery became a utility

- What began as an experimental race to deliver groceries in ten minutes has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure play that now moves everything from high-end electronics to white goods in minutes. In a single calendar year, the question for the Indian consumer has permanently shifted from "will it arrive?" to "how many minutes until it does?"

The era of the 'delivery day' ended in 2025 as India's retail landscape underwent a fundamental transformation, with the great convergence of traditional e-commerce and quick commerce erasing the boundaries between planned shopping and instant gratification.

What began as an experimental race to deliver groceries in ten minutes has evolved into a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure play that now moves everything from high-end electronics to white goods in minutes.

In a single calendar year, the question for the Indian consumer has permanently shifted from "will it arrive?" to "how many minutes until it does?" As the year draws to a close, the data reflect the sector in hyperdrive.

According to a year-end report by RedSeer Strategy Consultants, quick commerce has become India's fastest-growing retail format, reaching 33 million monthly users across 150+ cities. By 2030, it will command 10 per cent of branded retail sales.

Rising household incomes and a growing preference for convenience have made quick commerce the preferred shopping channel for an increasing share of urban consumers.

E-commerce giants Amazon and Flipkart had to launch their own quick commerce arms to not miss out on the massive treasure trove of quick commerce market.

The launch of 'Amazon Now' and 'Flipkart Minutes'—both offering sub-30-minute deliveries — signalled that speed is no longer a premium vertical but the industry's new baseline.

Dark stores transitioned from small neighbourhood hubs to megapods. These larger facilities, typically around 10,000-12,000 sq ft, are now capable of stocking over 50,000 stock-keeping units (SKUs), enabling platforms to deliver iPhones and air conditioners with the same velocity as milk and bread.

The sheer scale of the Q-com expansion was best illustrated during the Dhanteras festival, where platforms sold and delivered gold and silver coins within minutes.

The year's financial narrative reached a crescendo in December with Meesho's Rs 5,421 crore IPO, validating the immense purchasing power of the Tier-2 and Tier-3 value shopper.

Quick commerce unicorn Zepto has filed preliminary papers with markets regulator Sebi to raise Rs 11,000 crore through its initial public offering (IPO) using a confidential route, according to people familiar with the development.

The company is targeting a stock market listing in 2026, a move that could make it one of the youngest startups to debut on Indian exchanges.

If the listing goes through, Zepto will join its rivals Eternal (Zomato) and Swiggy, both of which are already listed on the exchanges.

However, the rapid physical expansion of dark stores triggered significant friction within the broader retail ecosystem. Consumer unions intensified calls against regulatory oversight as Q-com began eroding the margins of traditional Kirana stores.

This "Kirana Conflict" became a central theme in policy circles, in response to which the Competition Commission of India (CCI) in May notified the regulations for determining the cost of production, a move to help the watchdog more effectively assess alleged predatory pricing and deep discounting practices, especially in the quick commerce and e-commerce segments.

Consumer protection regulator CCPA issued notices to several quick commerce companies for violations related to packaged product disclosures mandated under the Legal Metrology Act.

The human element of this digital surge also faced intense scrutiny. Throughout 2025, the debate over gig labour welfare reached a fever pitch, and concerns regarding road safety—linked to the 10-minute pressure model—gained prominence.

The woes were finally heard when the government notified four labour codes in November, finally bringing the vast segment of gig workers under formal regulatory recognition and social security.

For the delivery partner dropping off groceries or the driver navigating city traffic, this move signalled the end of legal invisibility, transitioning them from the fringes of the "unorganised" sector into a formal social security net.

The introduction of uniform employment rights, mandatory appointment letters, and access to benefits such as provident funds, ESIC, and insurance underlaid a new foundation for stability and predictability for millions of gig and platform workers across India.

The trajectory heading into 2026 suggests a year defined by the dual themes of order consolidation and category deepening. The industry is moving toward a phase where the big three will fortify their market positions, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what can be delivered in under 30 minutes.

The coming year will require a more balanced approach toward regulatory compliance, particularly regarding labour welfare and competition with traditional trade.

—PTI

3 cops killed in clash with IS militants in Turkey

ANKARA, 29 DEC

In northwest Turkey, an operation against Islamic State suspects resulted in a deadly gunfight, killing three police officers and six militants, according to Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya. The clash occurred in Elmali, Yalova province, as police stormed a house where militants were hiding. Reinforcements from Bursa arrived during the operation, which began at 2am and ended at 9.40am. All five women and six children inside the house were evacuated safely. The militants were identified as Turkish nationals. Five suspects have been detained as investigations continue, with authorities closing five local schools and cutting off utilities to secure the area. This operation is part of over 100 raids nationwide targeting IS suspects planning attacks during festive periods. *—PTI*

Spanish soccer coach's body found in Indonesia

JAKARTA, 29 DEC

Indonesian rescuers recovered a female body believed to be part of the family of Spanish soccer coach Fernando Martín and his three children, who went missing after a boat sank near Serai Island. The body was found floating near the site, about 1km from the sinking, after a resident spotted it. The rescue team transported the body to a hospital for identification, as family members joined the process. Martín's wife, Andrea, and their youngest daughter, Mar, along with other survivors, are in good health. The boat, carrying the family and crew, sank Friday evening due to engine failure during a trip in Komodo National Park. Rescue efforts continue for the remaining family members, supported by police, navy, and local residents. *—PTI*

Midair helicopter crash in New Jersey kills 1

HAMMONTON, 29 DEC

Two helicopters collided midair over Hammonton, New Jersey, resulting in one death and critical injuries to another pilot, authorities report. Rescuers responded around 11.25am after witnesses saw one helicopter spinning rapidly. Flames engulfed one craft, which was extinguished by fire crews. The FAA confirmed the collision involved an Enstrom F-28A and an Enstrom 280C, with only pilots onboard. The deceased was identified as one pilot; the other was hospitalised with life-threatening injuries. The town, known for its agriculture and proximity to Pine Barrens, is investigating the crash. The FAA and NTSB will review pilot communications and visibility conditions. *—PTI*

US gives $2B aid to UN, warns agencies to 'adapt or die'

GENEVA, 29 DEC

The United States has announced a $2 billion pledge for UN humanitarian aid, even as President Donald Trump's administration continues to sharply cut foreign assistance and urges UN agencies to "adapt, shrink or die" amid new financial realities. While a fraction of past US contributions, officials described the amount as generous enough to retain Washington's position as the world's largest humanitarian donor. The pledge will create an umbrella fund, allowing allocations to individual agencies and priorities, reflecting US demands for sweeping reforms at the UN. The sum is a sliver of earlier US humanitarian funding, which reached $17 billion annually in recent years, UN data show. Critics warn Western aid cuts are pushing millions towards hunger. *—PTI*

'UKRAINE PEACE DEAL CLOSER THAN EVER'

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and US President Donald Trump shake hands after a meeting at Mar-a-Lago club on Sunday **PHOTO: PTI**

US offers Ukraine 15-year security guarantee as part of deal

PALM BEACH, 29 DEC

US President Donald Trump said on Sunday that Ukraine and Russia are "closer than ever before" to a peace agreement, while cautioning that negotiations remain fragile and the war could still drag on for years.

Speaking after hosting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at his Florida resort, Trump said a draft deal to end the four-year conflict was around "95 per cent done". The talks followed what Trump described as an "excellent" two-and-a-half-hour phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day.

The United States is offering Ukraine security guarantees for a period of 15 years as part of a proposed peace plan, Zelenskyy said, though he said he would prefer an American commitment of up to 50 years to deter Russia from further attempts to seize its neighbour's land by force.

Despite ongoing Russian strikes on Ukraine as Zelenskyy travelled to the US, Trump insisted he believed Putin was serious about peace. "Russia wants to see Ukraine succeed," Trump said at a joint news conference, praising Zelenskyy as "brave".

Both leaders admitted major "thorny"obstacles remain, particularly the future of Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia and the security guarantees Kyiv would need to prevent future invasions. After their meeting, Trump and Zelenskyy held a call with several European leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the leaders of the UK, France, Germany, Finland and Poland. Zelenskyy said Trump had agreed to host European leaders again, possibly in Washington, in January.

Trump said he would speak again with Putin. Putin's foreign policy adviser, Yuri Ushakov, confirmed the earlier Trump-Putin call was initiated by Washington and described it as "friendly" and "businesslike", but said a "bold political decision" was needed from Kyiv, especially regarding the Donbas region, for a full ceasefire.

Both sides identified Donbas as a central sticking point. Zelenskyy said Ukraine and Russia hold "different positions" on the issue, while Trump said it was "very tough" but resolvable.

Negotiators have been discussing a 20-point draft plan. The US has reportedly offered NATO-like security guarantees, as Kyiv signals willingness to drop its NATO membership bid in exchange for firm protection.

Trump warned talks could still fail. "In a few weeks, we will know one way or the other," he said, calling the negotiations highly complex and detailed. *—PTI*

China starts war drill near Taiwan amid Japan rift

BEIJING, 29 DEC

- The drills in which fighters, bombers, long range rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles will be used, comes in the backdrop of the US approval of a record USD 11.1 billion arms package to Taipei.

The Chinese military on Monday started new major war games in the "middle areas" of the Taiwan Strait amid rising diplomatic tensions with Japan over Taiwan that Beijing claims as its territory.

"The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theatre Command is deploying fighters, bombers and unmanned aerial vehicles with long-range rockets to conduct drills in the waters and airspace in the middle areas of the Taiwan Strait on Monday," state-run Xinhua reported.

Focusing on striking mobile ground targets, the drills intend to test the troops' capabilities of precision strikes on key targets.

China claims the self-governing Taiwan as part of its mainland and vows to integrate it.

The drills in which fighters, bombers, long range rockets and unmanned aerial vehicles will be used comes in the backdrop of the US approval of a record USD 11.1 billion arms package to Taipei which China sharply criticised.

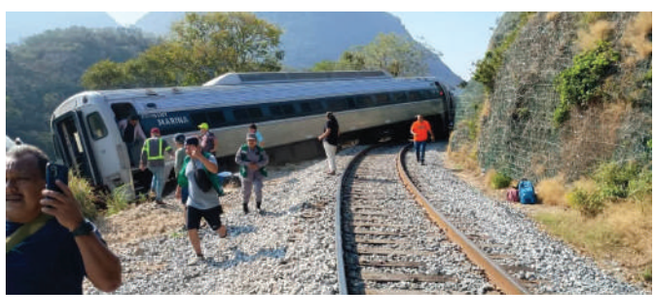
US President Donald Trump approved an arms package worth USD 11.1 billion for Taiwan, which, if cleared by the US Congress, would mark Washington's largest-ever arms sale to the island.

The landmark arms sale comes amid Taipei's concerns over a potential Chinese invasion.

China sharply criticised the US saying that Washington "blatantly announced its plan to sell advanced weapons to China's Taiwan region" and send a "wrong signal of Taiwan independence separatist forces."

The arms sale aids Taiwan's forces' plans to turn the island into a "powder keg," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Guo Jiakun told a media briefing here on 18 December. *— PTI*

The drills intend to test the troops' capabilities of precision strikes on key target **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**



The Interoceanic Train, linking Oaxaca and Veracruz, went off the rails on Sunday **PHOTO: X**

13 killed, 98 injured as train derails in Mexico

MEXICO CITY, 29 DEC

A train derailment accident in southern Mexico has resulted in a death toll of at least 13, with 98 injured, according to officials. The incident took place near Nizanda on a rail line connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico

The Interoceanic Train, linking Oaxaca and Veracruz, went off the rails on Sunday when passing a curve. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum confirmed the fatalities via social media, stating, "The Mexican Navy has informed me that, tragically, 13 people died in the Interoceanic Train accident."

She also reported that 98 others were injured, five seriously. Sheinbaum instructed the navy and the Ministry of the Interior's undersecretary of human rights to travel to the scene and assist affected families.

The train, which carried 241 passengers and nine crew members, was inaugurated in 2023 under then-President Andres Manuel López Obrador. The service aims to develop infrastructure along the isthmus of Tehuantepec to promote trade and connectivity between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The government's broader plans include turning the region into a strategic trade corridor with ports and rail lines linking the two oceans, with the current route spanning 180 miles. *—PTI*

BNP's Tarique Rahman files nomination papers

DHAKA, 29 DEC

BNP leaders filed the nomination papers of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman on Monday for the upcoming national elections, 'Daily Star' reported. Rahman recently returned after 17 years in self-exile.

The 'Daily Star,' said Tarique will contest from the Dhaka-17 constituency in the 13th Jatiya Sangsad election, scheduled for February 2026.

The papers were filed at the Dhaka Divisional Commissioner's office in Segunbagicha.

BNP chairperson's adviser, Abdus Salam, who was accompanied by the chief adviser of the Doctors Association of Bangladesh (DAB), Farhad Halim Donar, submitted the nomination papers on Tarique Rahman's behalf.

After spending 17 years in exile, the BNP Acting Chairman, Tarique Rahman, returned to Dhaka on 25 December in what is considered a major political event after the toppling of Sheikh Hasina.

Meanwhile, the main leader of last year's violent movement that toppled the then government in Bangladesh, Mahfuz Alam, on Sunday distanced himself from his disciples organised under the National Citizen Party (NCP) banner over their move to forge an electoral alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami.

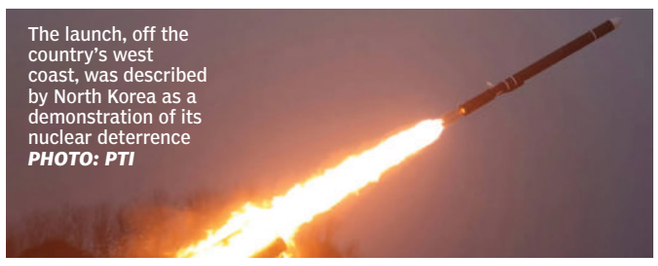
In a Facebook post, Alam declined to be a "part of NCP," as a rift in the party over the alliance issue resulted in a memorandum signed by 30 of its leaders opposing the move and two ranking ones announcing their resignation. *— Agencies*

N Korea tests long-range cruise missiles

SEOUL, 29 DEC

North Korea announced it has conducted tests of long-range strategic cruise missiles into the sea, signalling a significant escalation in its military capabilities.

The launches, off the country's west coast, were described by North Korea as a demonstration of its nuclear deterrence. Kim Jong Un expressed "great satisfaction" with the tests, stating they are "a responsible exercise of the right to self-defence and war deterrence" amid external threats. The tests come ahead of North Korea's planned Workers' Party congress early next year, the first in five years, with attention on whether Kim will set new priorities in relations with the US and respond to Washington's calls to resume talks.



The launch, off the country's west coast, was described by North Korea as a demonstration of its nuclear deterrence **PHOTO: PTI**

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said they were aware of several missile launches from the capital region and remain ready to respond to provocations through the US alliance. While UN resolutions prohibit North Korea from ballistic missile launches, cruise missile testing remains lawful but poses threats due to their manoeuvrability and low-altitude flight. *—PTI*

Pak told its media to counter Al Jazeera on Afghan

ISLAMABAD, 29 DEC

Pakistan's military media wing has come under scrutiny after reports claimed that internal directives were circulated outlining a coordinated media response against Qatar and its state-funded broadcaster, Al Jazeera, over their coverage of Afghanistan and the Taliban.

According to a CNN-News18 report, Pakistani media organisations, digital platforms and analysts were advised not to present the Afghan Taliban regime as a "perfect or stabilising force". They were also instructed to question what the military described as Qatar's "dubious diplomatic neutrality" in relation to Afghan affairs.

The alleged directives called for closer examination of Doha's diplomatic role and urged a stronger pushback against narratives viewed as undermining Pakistan's position. Particular attention was reportedly directed at Al Jazeera, with the documents claiming the broadcaster does not function independently of Qatar's foreign policy objectives. Repeated editorial trends were cited as evidence that its coverage aligns with state priorities, raising questions about its neutrality and credibility.

Media outlets were reportedly encouraged to underline the perceived link between Qatari diplomacy and media coverage, and to question whether Doha's involvement in Afghanistan reflects genuine mediation or strategic image-building. *—Agencies*

VICTIMS NOT IDENTIFIED

16 elderly residents killed in Indonesia's nursing home fire

JAKARTA, 29 DEC

At least 16 people were killed in a fire that broke out at a nursing home in the capital of Indonesia's North Sulawesi province, Manado, on Sunday, Xinhua reported.

The identification process of the victims is underway at Bhayangkara Hospital, where bodies were brought in after the accident, before authorities could contact the victims' families.

The fire erupted at around 8.36 pm (local time) on Sunday at the Panti Werdha Damai nursing home, located in the Ranomuut Sub-district of Paal Dua District in Manado

The blaze was brought under control by 9.30 pm, after three fire engines arrived at the scene.

Police responded swiftly to secure the area and assist in rescue operations. Survivors were moved to Manado City Regional Hospital and Permata Bunda Hospital, while the deceased were removed.

Forensic teams from the police have launched an investigation, including a crime scene examination and witness interviews, to determine the sequence of events and the preliminary cause of the fire, Xinhua said.

Further details of the incident are awaited.

Earlier this month, at least five people were killed after a residential house caught fire in the capital of Jakarta.

Xinhua said the fire broke out at around 8.10 pm on 18 December. It was brought under control by 11 pm (local time) by 10 fire engines. The victims were discovered the next morning. *— ANI*

The identification process of the victims is underway at Bhayangkara Hospital **PHOTO: X**

Rain floods Gaza as Bibi heads to US to meet Don

KHAN YOUNIS, 29 DEC

Winter rain lashed the Gaza Strip over the weekend, flooding camps as Palestinians displaced by two years of war attempted to stay dry in tents frayed by months of use.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travelled for an expected meeting on Monday with US President Donald Trump in Florida about the second phase of the ceasefire. The first phase that took effect on 10 October was meant to bring a surge in humanitarian aid for Gaza, including shelter.

Netanyahu made no public statement as he departed.

In the southern city of Khan Younis, blankets were soaked and clay ovens meant for cooking were swamped. Children wearing flip-flops waded through puddles. Some people used shovels or tin cans to remove water from tents. Others clawed at the ground to pry collapsed shelters from the mud.

"Puddles formed, and there was a bad smell," said Majdoleen Tarabein, displaced from Rafah in southern Gaza. "The tent flew away. We do not know what to do or where to go."

She and family members tried to wring muddy blankets dry by hand. She said her family is still reeling from her husband's death less than two weeks ago.

At least 12 people, including a two-week-old infant, have died since 13 December from hypothermia or collapses of war-damaged homes. *— PTI*

Children walk by puddles of water near a camp in Gaza **PHOTO: PTI**

PHOTO: PTI

Rupee falls by 8P, closes at 89.98 against USD

MUMBAI, 29 DEC

The rupee depreciated eight paise to close at 89.98 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by foreign fund outflows and a negative trend in domestic equities. Forex traders said persistent capital withdrawals from foreign investors, alongside heightened dollar demand from importers, dented investor sentiments. At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 89.95 against the dollar and touched an intraday low of 89.99 and a high of 89.88. At the end of Monday's session, the rupee was quoted at 89.98 (provisional) against the greenback. Meanwhile, the dollar index was trading marginally higher by 0.02 per cent at 98.03, as most markets are in a holiday mood and trading volumes are thin, limiting big moves and keeping the DXY rangebound. *—PTI*

Modi to meet economists ahead of 2026-27 Budget

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet eminent economists and sectoral experts on Tuesday to seek their views on the upcoming Budget, a senior government official said. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is likely to present the Union Budget for 2026-27 on 1 February. She will present the Budget against a backdrop of geopolitical uncertainties and a steep 50 per cent US tariff on shipments from India. Besides economists and sectoral experts, Niti Aayog Vice Chairman Suman Bery, NITI Aayog CEO BVR Subrahmanyam and other members of the Aayog will also attend the meeting. *—PTI*

Jindal Steel to double Raigarh plant's capacity

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Jindal Steel on Monday announced plans to double its annual manufacturing capacity of structural steel at its Raigarh facility. The Naveen Jindal Group company said it will expand capacity from 1.2 million tonnes (MT) per annum to 2.4MT by mid 2028. The expansion will substantially enhance the availability of heavy and ultra-heavy structural steel sections in India and support Jindal Steel's leadership in the segment, the company said. Steel structures are of huge importance for infrastructure like bridges, towers and large buildings. With the ongoing expansion, production capability will extend to ultra-heavy sections reaching 1,100mm depth and 1,500 kg per metre. The company did not disclose the value of the expansion plan. *—PTI*

Delhi HC blocks 18 entities over Akasa trademark

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

The Delhi High Court has issued an interim injunction against an aviation institute and 17 additional entities for trademark infringement relating to Akasa Air. Justice Manmeet Pritam Singh Arora heard a case from SNV Aviation Private Limited, the operator of Akasa Air, alleging that the defendants, including Alaska Aviation Academy Pvt Ltd, had been involved in job scams using Akasa's trademarks. The lawsuit highlighted complaints from the public about defendants falsely posing as employees and soliciting fees for non-existent recruitment opportunities. The court found a prima facie case in favour of the plaintiff, stating, "These acts... clearly amount to misrepresentation, deception, and passing off." *—PTI*

Govt seeks $30B from BP, RIL for gas underproduction

Reliance says there is no such claim from government

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

PHOTO: X

The government is seeking over USD 30 billion from Reliance Industries Ltd and BP as compensation, alleging the partners built larger-than-required facilities at the KG-D6 fields and subsequently failed to meet natural gas output targets, sources said.

The government made the claim during its submissions before a three-member arbitration tribunal that on 7 November concluded hearings on the 14-year-old dispute.

The tribunal is expected to give its award next year and the party that loses will most likely challenge it before the Supreme Court, three sources aware of the matter said.

Reliance Industries however said that there was no claim from the government against the company and BP .

Sources said the government in the arbitration proceedings sought monetary value of the natural gas that wasn't produced as well as a compensation for excess amount spent on installations, fuel marketing, and interest.

It put the value for all of this at over USD 30 billion.

The dispute stems from alleged failure of Reliance to comply with approved investment plan that led to under-utilisation of capacity at the Dhirubhai-1 and 3 fields - the first and the largest of discoveries in the Krishna Godavari basin KG-DWN-98/3 (KG-D6) block to be put on production.

Natural gas output from Dhirubhai-1 and 3 (D1&D3) gas fields started to lag company projections from the very second year of production in 2010, and the field ceased to produce in February 2020, much ahead of its projected life.

Reliance, in an initial field development plan, had proposed a USD 2.47 billion investment to produce a peak of 40 million standard cubic meters per day of gas. *—PTI*

AMID WEAK GLOBAL TRENDS

Silver, gold retreat from record high

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Silver prices retreated from record highs to trade lower by nearly 3 per cent at Rs 2.32 lakh per kg in the futures trade on Monday as investors booked profits after sharp gains amid weak global trends.

In a highly volatile session on Monday, silver touched a lifetime high of Rs 2,54,174 per kg in early trade, prompting investors to take profits.

Silver futures plummeted by Rs 7,124, or 2.97 per cent, to hit a low of Rs 2,32,663 per kg on the Multi-Commodity Exchange (MCX). In the last week, the white metal soared by 15.04 per cent, or Rs 31,348, on MCX.

Gold opened higher but pared gains due to profit-booking, snapping a four-day rally. Gold futures depreciated Rs 1,497, or 1.07 per cent, to Rs 1,38,376 per 10 grams. It had scaled a fresh peak of Rs 1,40,465 per 10 grams on Friday.

On the global front, the March 2026 contract of silver retreated sharply from its record levels. On the Comex, the white precious metal declined by USD 3.49, or 4.51 per cent, to USD 73.71 per ounce. Earlier in the session, silver futures breached the USD 80-per-ounce mark for the first time, reaching a record USD 82.67 per ounce, up by USD 5.47, or 7.09 per cent. *—PTI*

Arvind Fashions to buy 31.25% shares in Flipkart

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

PHOTO: FLIPKART

Arvind Fashions Ltd has announced plans to acquire a 31.25 per cent stake in Arvind Youth Brands Pvt Ltd (AYBPL) from the Flipkart group for Rs 135 crore. AYBPL operates the popular apparel brand 'Flying Machine,' which reported a turnover of Rs 432.16 crore for the financial year ending 31 March 2025.

The company highlighted that, over the past five years, Flying Machine has successfully re-established itself as a leading brand among digital consumers. The partnership with Flipkart has been instrumental in positioning Flying Machine as a top casual wear brand, appealing to the fashion-conscious youth in India.

Amisha Jain, Managing Director and CEO of Arvind Fashions Ltd, stated, "Our relationship with the Flipkart group will continue, ensuring consumers can still shop Flying Machine on its platforms. It will also be available to consumers on other digital channels and portals."

Arvind Fashions will acquire 31.25 per cent of AYBPL's total shareholding on a fully diluted basis, which includes one equity share of Rs 10 each and 58,95,852 compulsory convertible preference shares of Rs 100 each. The transaction is expected to close on 29 December, 2025, after which AYBPL will become a wholly-owned subsidiary of Arvind Fashions Ltd. *—PTI*

India's exports to Aus rose 8% in 3 years, says Goyal

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

India's exports to Australia have risen by 8 per cent over the past three years under the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, welcomed by Union Minister of Commerce & Industry **Piyush Goyal**. This positive trend was reported on the anniversary of the trade deal, reflecting substantial improvements in India's trade balance.

From 1 January 2026, all Australian tariff lines will be zero-duty for Indian exports, facilitating tax-free entry for Indian goods and potentially benefitting key sectors such as manufacturing, textiles, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. *—ANI*

Sensex, Nifty decline for 4th day amid foreign fund outflows

MUMBAI, 29 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

Benchmark Sensex declined by nearly 346 points while Nifty closed below 26,000 on Monday due to selling in utilities, IT and blue-chip oil & gas shares, foreign fund outflows and thin year-end trading.

Extending the downtrend to the fourth day running, the 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 345.91 points or 0.41 per cent to settle at 84,695.54. During the day, it dropped 403.59 points or 0.47 per cent to 84,637.86.

Registering its third day of decline, the 50-share NSE Nifty edged lower by 100.20 points or 0.38 per cent to 25,942.10.

Among 30 Sensex firms, Adani Ports was the biggest loser, dropping by 2.22 per cent. HCL Tech fell by 1.86 per cent, Power Grid by 1.85 per cent, Trent by 1.36 per cent, Bharat Electronics by 1.26 per cent and Bharti Airtel by 1.14 per cent.

Reliance Industries was a major drag on key indices, closing 0.88 per cent lower. According to sources, the government is seeking over USD 30 billion from Reliance Industries and BP as compensation, alleging the partners built larger-than-required facilities at the KG-D6 fields and subsequently failed to meet natural gas output targets. Tata Steel was the biggest gainer among Sensex shares, rising by 1.83 per cent. Asian Paints, Hindustan Unilever, and Eternal also advanced.

Broader markets also came under pressure as the BSE smallcap gauge declined by 0.58 per cent and midcap index dipped by 0.45 per cent. *—PTI*

Paramount TPA announces merger with Medi Assist Insurance TPA

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Medi Assist Healthcare Services Ltd announced on Monday that its step-down subsidiary, Paramount Health Services & Insurance TPA (Paramount TPA), will merge with fellow group entity Medi Assist Insurance TPA. Both entities are engaged in the business of providing health administration services as a Third Party Administrator (TPA) to insurance companies in connection with health services.

According to a regulatory filing, the boards of both companies have approved the merger, which will be carried out without cash consideration. Paramount TPA is currently a wholly owned subsidiary of Medi Assist Insurance TPA.

The consolidation will provide seamless access to Paramount TPA's assets, including intangible assets, licences and intellectual property, helping reduce overheads, strengthen financials, and support future growth and shareholder value.

Paramount TPA had a turnover of Rs 178.5 crore while its promoter company had total revenue of Rs 667.8 crore at the end of March 2025. Medi Assist is not a party to the Scheme of amalgamation and the shareholding pattern of the company shall remain unchanged, it said. *—PTI*

Coffee Day Enterprises to repay Rs 70 cr loan to Axis Bank

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Coffee Day Enterprises, the parent company of Café Coffee Day, has secured a one-time settlement with Axis Bank for its outstanding debt amounting to Rs 70 crore. In a regulatory filing, the company stated: "Axis Bank Ltd approved for One Time Settlement of the outstanding loan with the company for Rs 70 crore."

Under the agreement, Coffee Day Enterprises Limited (CDEL) is set to repay the full amount by 30 September 2026. The debt-laden company is working to address its financial obligations through the resolution of assets and other means.

Post the death of its founder, VG Siddhartha, in July 2019, CDEL has faced numerous challenges, including alleged misappropriation of Rs 3,535 crore into Mysore Amalgamated Coffee Estates Limited, a personal venture of Siddhartha.

As of 30 June 2025, CDEL's total financial liabilities stood at Rs 372.52 crore, with significant defaults reported. Earlier this year, National Company Law Appellate Tribunal quashed insolvency proceedings against CDEL. *—PTI*

PHOTO: IAF

IAF, IIT Madras collaborate for airborne communication

BENGALURU, 29 DEC

The Indian Air Force's Software Development Institute (SDI) has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras to co-design and develop an indigenous digital communication system for airborne applications. This partnership is a crucial advancement towards the Atmanirbhar Bharat vision, aimed at enhancing self-reliance in defence technology and strengthening India's strategic capabilities.

The MoU was signed by Air Vice Marshal R Guruhari, Commandant of SDI; Prof V Kamakoti, Director of IIT Madras; and Dr MJ Shankar Raman, CEO of Pravartak Technologies Foundation.

Air Vice Marshal Guruhari stated, "This partnership with IIT Madras is a visionary step towards achieving complete self-reliance in critical defence communication technologies." Prof Kamakoti echoed this sentiment, noting the collaboration exemplifies the integration of advanced communication technologies and cybersecurity to create robust indigenous solutions.

The initiative aims to develop advanced algorithms for networking and encryption, focusing on secure data transmission, resilience against threats, and integration with existing defence systems, reinforcing the Government of India's emphasis on indigenisation in defence procurement. *—PTI*

ICRA: Proposed IBC promising but overlooks realty issues

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Proposed amendments to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) are promising, according to credit rating agency ICRA, but they fall short of addressing critical issues in the real estate sector. Notably, this sector, which represents the second-highest share of cases under the corporate insolvency resolution process (CIRP), has not been sufficiently highlighted in the current proposals.

While ICRA acknowledges that the Lok Sabha Select Committee (SCLB) recommendations may enhance recovery rates and reduce resolution timelines, they caution that benefits may be limited primarily to non-real estate cases. "Real estate sector-specific reforms have not been addressed despite the sector's significant presence in ongoing insolvency cases," the agency stated.

Despite the IBC marking nine years of operation and yielding around Rs 4 lakh crore in recoveries, the average recovery rate remains low at about 32 per cent of admitted claims. *—ANI*

DESPITE 60:40 FUNDING RATIO

States to gain Rs 17,000 cr from G RAM G: SBI

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

States are expected to remain net gainers, where states could gain Rs 17,000 crore collectively, in fund sharing under the proposed Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB-G RAM G) Act, and the framework can be further scaled up by states through their own contribution, according to a report by State Bank of India (SBI).

The report said that using a simulated scenario of a normative assessment based only on the Centre's share, states could collectively gain around Rs 17,000 crore when compared to the average allocation of the last seven years. This analysis is based on seven attributes or parameters, structured around the twin fulcrum of equity and efficiency.

The Act is expected to bring more households into the rural employment framework, increase average days of work **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

SBI noted that since the introduction of the Bill, there has been significant debate, particularly around concerns that the revised funding pattern could shift a higher financial burden to states.

One of the major criticisms relates to the change in the funding ratio to 60:40 between the Centre and states (excluding North-Eastern states, Union Territories, and Himalayan states).

However, the report argued that fears of the revised ratio worsening state finances or forcing higher borrowing are unfounded and largely stem from a lack of understanding of state finances.

Additionally, the Act is expected to bring more households into the rural employment framework, increase average days of work, reduce inefficiencies and boost consumption, according to a report by SBI.

The report said the revamped Act is likely to increase the number of households working under the scheme from the current level of 5.8 crore households. During FY25, around 5.78 crore households worked under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). *—ANI*

BLACKSTONE'S FIRM FILES FOR ₹ 2.6K CR IPO

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Horizon Industrial Parks, backed by global private equity firm Blackstone, on Monday filed preliminary papers with markets regulator SEBI to raise Rs 2,600 crore through an initial public offering (IPO).

The issue is entirely a fresh offer of equity shares, with no offer for sale component. According to the draft red herring prospectus , about Rs 2,250 crore from the proceeds will be used to repay borrowings.

Blackstone currently holds 89 per cent stake in the company, the draft papers showed.

Ahead of the public issue, the company has already raised nearly USD 200 million (around Rs 1,650 crore) in a pre-IPO round, with participation from investors such as 360 ONE, SBI Life Insurance, SBI, Radhakishan Damani, EAAA and DSP Investments.

Including the pre-IPO placement, Horizon is targeting a total fund raise of about Rs 4,250 crore.

Horizon Industrial Parks is an industrial and logistics infrastructure developer, owner and operator with a pan-India portfolio of about 60 million square feet spread across 46 assets in 10 cities.

Blackstone made its first acquisition in the platform in 2020 and has scaled it to the current size over the past five years.

The firm operates across fulfilment centres, industrial facilities and in-city logistics assets. Its portfolio is around 95 per cent committed, with more than 100 customers, nearly 60 per cent of which are Fortune 500 companies. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Knight Riders beat Gulf Giants, reach ILT20 Playoffs

DUBAI, 29 DEC

Abu Dhabi Knight Riders triumphed over Gulf Giants by 32 runs in a crucial ILT20 league match, securing their place in the playoffs. The Knight Riders will face Dubai Capitals in the Eliminator on 1 January. A stellar partnership of 131 runs between Michael Pepper, who scored 83 off 51 balls, and Phil Salt, who remained unbeaten on 72 from 56 deliveries, propelled the Knight Riders to 179/1. In response, Jason Holder's early wickets set the tone, while Moeen Ali's innings of 79 off 49 balls kept the Giants in contention. However, pivotal strikes from Sunil Narine and Andre Russell saw the Giants collapse to 147/9, ensuring the Knight Riders' progression.—*PTI*

Masood scores fastest first-class 200 for Pakistan

KARACHI, 29 DEC

Test captain Shan Masood has set a new record for the fastest double century by a Pakistani in first-class cricket, reaching the milestone in just 177 balls. This achievement surpassed Inzamam-ul-Haq's long-standing record of 188 balls set in 1992 during a tour match in England. Masood, playing for Sui Northern Gas against Sahar Associates, finished day one unbeaten on 212 runs from 185 balls. The record for the fastest double hundred by a visiting batsman remains with India's Virender Sehwag, who scored 200 in 182 balls during a Lahore Test in 2006. Masood, 36, recently declined a full-time role with the Pakistan Cricket Board.—*PTI*

India post record score against Lanka in 4th match

India seek series whitewash, Lanka eye consolation win

THIRU'PURAM, 29 DEC

India will continue aggressively completing a 5-0 series whitewash against vanquished Sri Lanka in the final women's T20 International on Tuesday 7 pm. The five-match series served as India's preparation for the T20 World Cup in England in June next year. Following Tuesday's game, India will play three T20 Internationals each in Australia and England before the showpiece event.

After a group-stage exit at the 2024 T20 World Cup, India have adopted a more aggressive approach, captain Harmanpreet Kaur said. India's bowlers spearheaded the turnaround, while Shafali Verma impressed with three half-centuries in four matches at a strike rate of 185.82. Debutant Vaishnavi Sharma emerged as a joint-leading wicket-taker with four scalps at an economy rate of 5.73. Fielding, however, remains an area of concern.

India's captain Harmanpreet Kaur said India have adopted an aggresive approach after last year's T20 Word Cup PHOTO: PTI

Mandhana and Shafali stitched together India's highest opening stand in women's T20Is, smashing 162 off 92 balls in a dominant display of aggressive batting. India's decision to promote Richa Ghosh to No. 3 also paid rich dividends, with the wicketkeeper-batter blasting an unbeaten 40 off just 16 deliveries.

- After the first three matches were low-scoring affairs, the fourth T20I turned into a runfest, with both India and Sri Lanka registering their highest-ever totals in the format.

After the first three matches were low-scoring affairs, the fourth T20I turned into a runfest, with both India and Sri Lanka registering their highest-ever totals in the format. Although India's 221 for 2 proved too much for Sri Lanka, who managed 191 for 6. The Islanders would take confidence from their vastly improved batting display as they seek a consolation win.

India: Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC)
Sri Lanka: Chamari Athapaththu (C) —*PTI*

PCB to manage Multan Sultans in next edition of PSL

LAHORE, 29 DEC

Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi confirmed that the board will manage the Multan Sultans for the (Pakistan Super League) PSL 11, appointing a committee after the team is finalized for the auction. This is the first time since the league's 2016 launch that a it will directly run by the PCB, raising concerns over the PSL's brand reputation.

Ali Tareen recently quit as the owner of PSL's most expensive franchise, Multan Sultans, citing differences with the PCB and alleging the board ignored his request for the renewal contract after the valuation process. The previous owner of the Multan, Ali Tareen, has been allowed to bid for one of the two new teams in the league in the 8 January auction.

While the five other PSL franchises renewed their agreements, Multan was excluded after Tareen received a legal notice for repeated contract breaches; Naqvi said the board could have sold the franchise, but had to follow Public Procurement Regulatory Authority (PPRA) rules.

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Naqvi announced that former Pakistan captain Wasim Akram has been appointed as the PSL's brand ambassador and the bowling great will take on the post formally on 1 January. Multan was paying an annual franchise fee of USD 6.35 million to the PCB. —*PTI*

NZ's Bracewell retires from all forms of cricket

WELLINGTON, 29 DEC

New Zealand all-rounder Doug Bracewell has retired from cricket aged 35. Bracewell represented the Blackcaps from 2011 to 2023, playing 28 Tests, 21 ODIs and 20 T20Is, taking 120 wickets and scoring 915 runs.

His returns included 74 Test wickets with 568 runs, 26 ODI wickets and 221 runs, and 20 T20I wickets with 126 runs.

Bracewell's final appearance came in a Test against Sri Lanka in Wellington in 2023. He retired following a recent rib injury suffered during a domestic cricket. A career highlight was New Zealand's 2011 Hobart Test win over Australia, where his match figures of 6 for 40 sealed a seven-run victory. —*ANI*

FIDE CHAMPIONSHIPS

PM Modi hails Humpy and Erigaisi's World Rapid bronzes

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday congratulated Indian chess stars Koneru Humpy and Arjun Erigaisi for securing bronze medals at the FIDE World Rapid Championships in Doha. Lauding their "dedication and hard work," the Prime Minister highlighted their achievements in the Women's and Open categories, respectively. The Prime Minister often makes it a point to acknowledge the achievements of India's athletes and para-athletes, personally meeting many of them across sports disciplines.

Defending champion Humpy was denied a third World Rapid crown on Sunday after FIDE's tie-break rules placed her behind China's Zhu Jiner and Russia's Aleksandra Goryachkina, despite all three finishing the final round with 8.5 points. Had Humpy won the title on Sunday, it would have made her only the first woman chess player to win three World Rapid crowns -- her previous title-winning efforts came in 2019 and 2024.

Koneru Humpy PHOTO:PTI

She would have also become the second woman player after China's Ju Wenjun to clinch back-to-back titles.

PM Modi also appreciated the grit of Erigaisi, who finished behind world No 1 Magnus Carlsen and Russian GM Vladislav Artemiev to earn a historic bronze. The 22-year-old became only the second Indian male, after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand, to podium at the World Rapid Chess Championship.

Humpy will get a chance to stake their claim to the World Blitz title when the event commences in Doha later on Monday. —*PTI*

DELHI BOY JAGREET MISRA WINS FIDE RAPID RATING EVENT

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Delhi chess prodigy Jagreet Misra racked up an impressive 8.5 points in nine rounds to win the inaugural ChessVeda FIDE Rapid Rating Tournament in Greater Noida.

The 13-year-old's performance earned him 90 rating points, highlighting his tactical sharpness and competitive maturity as he remained unbeaten in the tournament.

The Mount Carmel School student received a cash prize of Rs 25,000 for the win.

The tournament saw participation from 592 Indian and foreign players, including International Masters, FIDE Masters, and Candidate Masters.Jagreet had recently defeated a Grandmaster Blagojevic Dragisa (ELO 2446) from Montenegro. —*PTI*

ASHES DRAMA

ICC rates MCG pitch 'unsatisfactory'

DUBAI, 29 DEC

The ICC on Monday rated the pitch used for the fourth Ashes Test between England and Australia at Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) as unsatisfactory, handing the venue one demerit point, deeming it "too much in favour of the bowlers," according to match referee Jeff Crowe.

As many as 20 wickets fell on the opening Test day, which England went on to win by four wickets. Six demerit points will result in a 12 month ban on the venue.

The pitch drew heavy criticism with England captain Ben Stokes saying it wasn't great for the game. Cricket Australia called it bad for business. The spectators witnessed a total of 36 wickets fall across only 142 overs and no batter managing to reach the 50 run mark.

Despite England securing their first Test victory on Australian soil since 2011, Australia have already retained the Ashes by winning the first three Tests to take an unassailable 3–0 lead. The final Test of the series will be played in Sydney, beginning 4 January. —*PTI*

England's Atkinson ruled out of final Ashes Test

SYDNEY, 29 DEC

England pacer Gus Atkinson was ruled out of the final Ashes Test in Sydney with a left hamstring injury after pulling up during the Boxing Day Test, adding to the tourists' growing injury list. Atkinson played in the two heavy 8-wicket defeats in the first two tests in Perth and Adelaide, before being dropped for Josh Tongue for the third test at Adelaide. He was recalled for the injured Archer for the Boxing Day test, England's first win in Australia since 2011, and had a series return of six wickets at 47.33.Captain Ben Stokes, allrounder Will Jacks and specialist spinner Shoaib Bashir remain available as bowling options, with Bashir yet to feature. —*PTI*

Shastri could coach struggling England: Monty Panesar

Former England cricketer Monty Panesar backed Ravi Shastri as a potential leader to lift England's cricket team after the Ashes debacle. Panesar highlighted Shastri's successful track record with India, saying his team-building approach could benefit England and urged the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) to consider him for a top coaching role. Panesar said the outcome of the Sydney Test might influence the ECB's key decision-makers on whether McCullum's approach is correct, adding that England may need a different voice going forward. England, under head coach Brendon McCullum, has lost 17 matches and won 25 from 45. —*ANI*

Bhutan's Sonam becomes 1st bowler to pick 8 wickets in T20

GELEPHU, 29 DEC

Bhutan spinner Sonam Yeshey has scripted history by becoming the first bowler to take eight wickets in a men's T20 International match.

The left-arm spinner achieved the unprecedented feat during the third T20I against Myanmar in Gelephu Mindfulness City, Bhutan, on December 26, according to ESPN.

The 22-year-old returned remarkable figures of 8 for 7, bowling Myanmar out for 45 in response to Bhutan's 127 for 9."A spell for the ages! Sonam Yeshey's unbelievable 8/7 in four overs goes down as a world record," Bhutan Cricket posted on their X account.

No bowler had previously taken an eight-wicket haul in any T20 match, international or otherwise.

The previous best bowling figures in T20 Internationals belonged to Malaysia pacer Syazrul Idrus, who claimed 7 for 8 against China back in 2023.

- During the third T20I against Myanmar in Gelephu Mindfulness City, Bhutan, the 22-year-old returned remarkable figures of 8 for 7, bowling Myanmar out for 45 in response to Bhutan's 127 for 9. Becoming the first bowler to take eight wickets in a men's T20 International match. No bowler had previously taken an eight-wicket haul in any T20 match.

Apart from Idrus, only Bahrain's Ali Dawood has taken seven wickets in a T20I, returning figures of 7 for 19 against Bhutan earlier this year.

Netherlands all-rounder Colin Ackermann, who returned figures of 7 for 18 for Leicestershire against Birmingham Bears in 2019, and Bangladesh pacer Taskin Ahmed, who claimed 7 for 19 for Durbar Rajshahi against Dhaka Capitals earlier this year, are the only two players to have achieved the feat in T20s. —*PTI*

Kohli to play 6 Jan Vijay Hazare Trophy game for Delhi

NEW DELHI, 29 DEC

Star India batter Virat Kohli will play Delhi's Vijay Hazare Trophy game against the Railways on 6 January at the BCCI Centre of Excellence (COE) in Bengaluru, DDCA President Rohan Jaitley said on Monday.

The BCCI diktat for all centrally-contracted players was to take part in at least two Vijay Hazare games but Kohli wants to play a third match as he gears up for the home series against New Zealand this month.

"As of now, he is playing. Virat is available for three games," Delhi and Districts Cricket Association (DDCA) President Rohan Jaitley said.

Kohli was in good form in the first two games for Delhi, smashing 131 and 77 respectively.

In the process, he also became the fastest to 16,000 List A runs by reaching the milestone in his 330th innings, surpassing the iconic Sachin Tendulkar, who touched the landmark in 391 innings. — *PTI*

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

Skipper Shardul 'Lords' over Chhattisgarh

JAIPUR, 29 DEC

Skipper Shardul Thakur ticked all the boxes, right from winning the toss to blowing the Chhattisgarh top order with a match winning four-wicket burst, as Mumbai cruised to a nine wicket victory to complete a group stage hat trick in the Vijay Hazare Trophy here on Monday.

At the Jaipuria Vidyalaya ground, Shardul won the toss and used the early morning nip to good effect to reduce Chhattisgarh to 10 for 4 inside first five overs.

Chhattisgarh never recovered from the blow and were out for 142 in 38.1 overs.

While Shardul wreaked havoc in the first half an hour, it was left-arm spinner Shams Mulani (5/31) who demolished the latter half of the Chhattisgarh batting by bowling stump-to-stump line. The last six wickets tumbled for 27 runs.

The chase was a cakewalk as Angkrish Raghuvanshi (68 no off 66 balls) along with veteran Siddhesh Lad (48 no off 42 balls) added 102 runs for the unbroken second wicket to wrap it off in just 24 overs.

Mumbai with 12 points consolidated their position on top of group C.

The day belonged to skipper Shardul (4/13 in 5 overs). He got into the act with the very second ball with right handed opener Ayush Tiwary edging one to Sarfaraz Khan in the slips.

Off the last ball of the opening over, one-drop Mayank Verma (3) was clean bowled. In his next two overs, Sarfaraz again got into the act with two slip takes off away going deliveries. — *PTI*

Shardul Thakur reduced Chhattisgarh to 10 for 4 in first five overs, ultimately winning four-wicket burst PHOTO: INSTAGRAM